

## Chapter 1 – Confronting the Enemy

On the grounds around the Scottish hamlet named Hogsmeade, a large castle was standing. This castle and the people living there just finished a very troubled year. This was no ordinary castle, because most of its inhabitants were students. That was a school, named Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The troubled year had started with the realization that one of the students could speak with snakes, a feat generally imputable to evil wizards. The fact that Harry Potter was inherently good at heart and brave as a Gryffindor did not even enter some of his peers' mind, even from his own House. You see, the student body was split from their first year into four houses, depending on each student's inner self. And the Houses were normally very loyal towards their own members, thus also very prejudiced towards the others. If you were sorted into Gryffindor, you were generally thought as brave. Most members of Hufflepuff were known for their loyalty. The students of Ravenclaw devoted their energy to studies most of the time, achieving generally higher marks in academic topics, but losing to more outdoors activities. And if you were sorted in Slytherin, you were thought to be ambitious and cunning. Those were the attributes searched by the Sorting Hat on your first day of school. However, the fact that some really evil wizards and witches came from Slytherin tended to make other houses, especially Gryffindor, wary of its students. And these prejudices, sometimes turning into student fights, were returned by Slytherin towards the allegedly stupid Gryffindors. Prejudices were running high this year, and Harry Potter was targeted by most Slytherins for being Gryffindor, and by other Houses for being a Parseltongue. But this gift saved the otherwise doomed school.

It was the end of the school year, the end of May to be exact, and Harry just ended a whole year's worth of trouble. This was done by the not-so-simple action of killing a bothersome basilisk, a frighteningly large and venomous snake that could petrify the people that looked in its eyes. Harry also exorcised the possession that the memory of the evil wizard Tom Riddle had on Ginny Weasley, his best friend's sister.

If you asked Harry, he'd answer that it had been the most difficult fight to get oneself into, as he almost died from a poisonous bite. If you asked Ginny, a big part of the school year has been lived on the passenger seat of her own mind, with a madman in control; quite the nightmare. If you asked Fawkes, Headmaster Dumbledore's phoenix, he would sing you a trill. What did you expect? Him telling you it was a heavy load to haul four persons out of a hell hole? And if you asked Albus Dumbledore, or any elite wizard living or dead, how it was possible for a twelve years old to survive a basilisk bite long enough to destroy a memory living through an accursed diary, they would think for a bit and say it's impossible. Well... if you really ask the Headmaster, he perhaps won't say that exactly, because the man knows something about life and destiny in general, and particularly about Harry. But nobody took the time to think about things when the teenagers got out of the Chamber.

Harry had just seen Ginny getting tucked in the hospital wing, where he discussed of the recent events with his Headmaster. Walking in the corridors towards his dorm, he reflected about Lucius Malfoy. It was well-known to Harry and his friends that Lucius did put the infamous diary in Ginny's school cauldron, nine months before. It was also Malfoys' house elf Dobby that caused some of the problems he had before and during school year, undoubtedly under Lucius' orders. But Harry and his friends took pity of Dobby. You see, house-elves are a diminutive branch of the ancient race of elves, and they have special abilities that are not kept in check by human magic. But they also have to obey the humans they belong to, to the last order. That is, until their master give them some clothes, thus marking their freedom.

Having the now inactive diary in a hand, Harry started to make a plan. His plan required that Lucius and Dobby be present, and having heard from Dumbledore that the man and his elf were in the castle for a hearing, he started to search for them towards the main entrance halls.

And they were there. Harry, seeing Lucius on the threshold, called after him and started running to him.

"Mr Malfoy! Mr Malfoy!"

If the man heard his name called, he didn't acknowledge it, and disappeared into thin air. Due to his two years of learning, Harry estimated that he was using a wizarding means of transportation called 'portkey', a charmed object transporting you instantaneously to a fixed location. Besides, as his friend Hermione often said, "You couldn't Apparate on Hogwarts grounds," so it ought to be a portkey. Lucius Malfoy left Dobby behind, obviously to follow thereafter, using the elf's own magic. Seeing the elf about to disappear, Harry sprints to him, and grabs his leg, trying to stop him. Unbeknownst to him, house-elves can use their method of travelling with luggage, even live ones – even if that is really painful to them. So that was how Harry Potter landed on his knees, panting, in the very home of Lucius Malfoy.

"What are you doing here?" The disgust from the man's voice was unmistakable.

"I... had... to... give you... something... back..." panted Harry, handing the diary to the man. Lucius shot a curious look at Harry but dismissed the behaviour to the unsafe trip and the Gryffindor stupidity. So, he took the book and, without even looking at it, threw it to Dobby. He then smirked towards the still crumpled form of Harry.

"You know, my son Draco, who you are not quite friends with, told me some interesting things. You obviously were very lucky to have survived three encounters with my master."

At this point, Harry's head shot up. "Your master? Is Voldemort you..."

"DON'T YOU DARE SAY HIS NAME!" Lucius yelled, interrupting. "Seeing you here, you obviously lost your proverbial luck. Nobody will find you here, and I'll be able to..." he drew his wand "...make you pay for..."

At this moment, they are interrupted by a gasp from Dobby. "Master Lucius freed Dobby?"

"Don't say stupid things, you dimwit dwarf!"

“But Master gave Dobby a sock!” Dobby exclaimed, taking a black sock from the open diary. Lucius’ eyes went as wide as saucers, and looked to Harry and back to Dobby, twice. If Harry had only been looking at the scene from afar, he would have been deliriously laughing at this point. Unfortunately that was not the case, and the display of emotions on Lucius Malfoy was turning into red fury. He turned to Harry and snarled “You’ll pay for this too! Without your precious Dumbledore, you are nothing! Avada Kedavra!”

Harry had started to crawl backwards since Lucius had turned back towards him, and he jumped in fright at the incantation, barely saving his life. He started to run full-speed in the unknown corridors and stairways, followed by a very angry and cursing Lucius, then by a frightened Dobby.

Running like this, followed by an armed and furious wizard was not a healthful thing to do, and Harry got his right side and back hurt by a two Cutting curses, and started to bleed. He also got hit by debris from a Reducto hitting the wall next to him.

After some minutes of running, seeing an open door on his right, Harry jumped inside, avoiding the most of a Bone Shattering curse, even if his left shoulder got hit. Still running, he barely noticed that the room looks like a maze, with shelves acting as walls, and walls themselves as high as Hogwarts’ Great Hall. He had just entered Malfoys’ library. And it was packed with books. Holding his injured left arm, he ducked behind the third wall of shelves, just as Lucius entered the library and advanced along the aisles, turning around to catch a glimpse of him.

The man was not used to run at all. As most pureblood families, he despised all form of physical training. Even not as hurt as Harry, he was panting and his vision was strained. Hearing Dobby’s rushed entrance in the room, thinking it was Harry moving, he whirled and cast his favourite spell over and over.

“Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!”

Unfortunately, the goal of the spell is to make things explode. It’s quite useful in the open air, but in the cramped library, the result is

obvious... and painful. The shelves he did hit, where he thought Harry was, began to tilt and to fall. Startled to feel a book falling on him, he looked up to see the closest shelves falling on him. Were he a little less startled and panting, he may have had the reflex to cast a physical shield. As it was, he got buried in books and wood splinters. The falling shelf being the one with some of the evilest books on it, Lucius also got his wand arm mangled by a gnawing tome, making him scream, while another book tried to turn him to stone by showing the living head of a basilisk. Then the shelf itself fell on him, and he fell as well. The shelf was so heavy that it broke his legs and, resting on surrounding books, began to press on his jugular, effectively and efficiently strangling him. Not any stronger than before, Lucius started to gasp for breath, and realized that, without outside help, he wasn't to survive for long. That would be the longest seconds of a man's life.

And he was not the only one having problems: though some shelves fell towards him, some other fell outwards, and Harry got showered too. One particular wood splinter tore at his leg, making him scream also, and the heavy books caused some ribs to break, stopping his scream shortly and making him gasp for breath instead. At this point, both wizards were pretty bad, freely bleeding on the previously immaculate floor.

The scene settled a little, some dust rising in the air, and some still-standing shelves damaged to the point of falling soon. Dobby had stopped on his tracks when Lucius started to cast explosions. Seeing the now desolated place, he noticed Harry's lolling head in a mountain of books, with a shelf going to fall on it.

At the same moment, on the verge of unconsciousness, Harry noticed a book that did fall beside him, and on which he was bleeding from the Cutting curses. That book glowed red and gold. Not understanding the repercussion of this, he grabbed it just when Dobby took hold of his head and repeated the previous feat of transporting a wizard with him.

At the same time, in Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Albus Dumbledore was holding a meeting with his senior staff in a secluded room of the hospital wing. After having discussed the

events of the night with Harry, he wanted to talk about the physical healing of the petrified students, as well as the mental healing of Ginny Weasley.

“...so that’s why they need to know to resist possession since this early, Severus.”

“I disagree, Headmaster. Occlumency is a very advanced and tough subject. Not all seventh years may qualify to learn it. So I doubt that at first year...”

“We are obviously not pushing all that into their schedule, of course, of course. Still, you could animate tutoring sessions where they can learn how to meditate and prepare them for the basics in Occlumency, right?”

Severus looked at his superior, aghast. Not only was he suggesting teaching these brats the fineries of Occlumency, but he was asking him to do so? And as a tutor as well, not as a full-fledged Professor? What a disgrace...

“There is no way I can do that, Headmaster, and you know I have other fishes to fry. Many of them and some are dangerous as well. Minerva, I’m sure you would...”

“I’m not as qualified as you, Severus.” The usually severe Professor Minerva McGonagall answered. She was somewhat dishevelled as this point, after the events of the day. “And you know that, as Deputy Headmistress and teacher, I have almost the same workload as our Headmaster. Besides, we are quite straying off topic, Albus.”

“I know, I know.” Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard of the time, holding more titles than any other living person, seemed suddenly very old to his staff. He sighed. “Well, I think young Ginevra would be most secure at home with her parents. But as you suggested, I’ll ask for a friend to check on her regularly. And about young Harry ...”

Severus Snape interrupted him, scowling. "What about him? He doesn't need anything else now? I swear, if this attention-seeking brat tries one more stunt like this..."

Professor McGonagall, although severe and fair to everyone, herself included, always had a soft spot for Harry. She could not let her colleague continue, but before she or anyone can cut the Potion Master, they heard a bang in the hospital main room, followed by the sound of furniture crashing, and a scream. However, as soon as they jumped to their feet, the scream stopped and they could only make out a frantic small voice behind the door. Severus, being the closest to the door, and the one with the quickest reflexes because of his "extracurricular" activities, was the first through the door, his wand in hand, and a curse in mouth. The little he saw in the dimly lit room made him scowl, though, and he half-turned to address his peers.

"What did I just say? Here he is, destroying school property and wreaking havoc again." He turned back again, and started to walk towards the unruly hair he noticed behind an upturned bed, punishment and detention in head. When he arrived, though, he stopped dead in his tracks, so abruptly that his colleagues ran into him.

"Hey!"

"Watch out!"

"What is it?"

Peering around, all teachers got their jaw dropping to the floor. Here was Harry Potter, for sure. Nobody could mistake his particular hair style for another. But that was all of Harry that was recognizable. His side was cut and bleeding profusely on the floor, his other arm bent at an impossible angle, one leg was visibly fractured, and he was covered with debris of plaster, wood, and paper. His glasses were broken, hanging loosely from one ear.

Harry wasn't not the only one newly arrived in the room, though. There was an agitated house-elf jumping madly around him.

“Harry Potter sir! Dobby is sorry, Dobby was not knowing sir was so bad! Dobby will...” and Dobby, in his mad jumping, turned towards the open-mouthed teachers. In one microsecond, they saw relief replacing worry in his oversized eyes.

“Professors! Professors! Harry Potter sir is hurt! Old master shoot all colours to Harry Potter sir and Dobby follow, and books, and...” everyone in the room could see that the elf was getting very agitated. Well, everyone conscious, which did not include Harry at this point. Being the first to recover, Dumbledore decided to steer the situation.

“Severus, do you have a Calming Draught for this distressed house-elf, so that he could explain us calmly the story. Minerva, if you can fetch Poppy, I’ll put Harry in a non-destroyed bed.”

Because Dobby was so in a hurry to leave with Harry from the dangerous place they were in, he had transported them both in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts all right, but some 10 feet in the air. Harry had crashed in the side of a bed, turning it upside down; Dobby had collided on top of Harry; and the book that Harry was holding got thrown under the nearest bed table, and stopped glowing.

Albus Dumbledore just did what he said, and Severus gave the potion to Dobby, but Minerva didn’t reach Poppy Pomfrey’s apartment door in time, because Madam Pomfrey came out of the conveniently placed flat.

“What is this noise? Albus, I gave you the adjoining room, not this one, and...” the rest of her tirade was lost as she took in the crumpled form of Harry Potter being levitated from the floor onto a fresh bed. She ran to the bed, drawing her wand, always the professional, and started to mutter diagnostic spells, each one more urgently than the previous. When she stopped, panting, she turned towards the Potion Master.

“Severus, quick, a full vial of Blood Replenishing potion, and a Skelegro dose. And a mild Pepperling, err... no! That will be all. Move!” The authority here was not held by Albus Dumbledore anymore, and Severus made a beeline to the hospital potion stocks, which he knew very well, being the one refilling them. While he departed, Madam

Pomfrey turned to Minerva McGonagall, and continued talking, also in a rush. "Minerva, the red leather satchel in my apartment in the cupboard on the left. Quick!"

She then turned to Harry and started incanting other spells, mostly closing his wounds so that he wouldn't bleed anymore. After that, she stopped and looked at Dumbledore.

"Albus, he almost died there. It seems his magic is holding him but he won't last long. Can you cast the Life Slower spell on him? I know it's demanding, but I don't ask for more than 5 minutes." Not hearing the end of her request, Albus had already started the spell. Poppy then turned towards Minerva who was bringing the red satchel back. She took it and opened it in one go, and Minerva gasped at the sight of the dozen shining steel needles. The wizards rarely see such Muggle tools, but Healers like Madam Pomfrey have to be prepared to everything and worse; and there are some circumstances when the injured person cannot drink a potion and it has to be injected.

Poppy Pomfrey took one dose of a green-looking fluid, the dose looking like a capped glass tube, and put it in a special syringe. Looking at Minerva, she said with a wry smile "It's not because we don't generally use Muggle stuff that we cannot improve on them."

She then turned back to Harry, and cast a spell on him so that she, and everyone else now, could see his heart. Minerva gasped. "It's not beating. Is he dead?" Her attention went to still-chanting Dumbledore, his concentration still maintaining the spell effect although small sweat beads could be seen on his forehead.

With no time to waste, Poppy Pomfrey pushed the needle directly into Harry's heart, and sent the precious fluid there, before dragging the syringe out. At the same time, Albus dropped his arms and sat down on a bed, slightly panting.

Just before the illusion showing Harry's heart dissipated, everyone saw the fluid going through the veins, and Harry becoming agitated on the bed. Madam Pomfrey rushed to his side, her hand asking the potions from Severus.

“Harry, Harry, you hear me, Harry? Good, good. You definitely should have a customized bed around here, no? Good boy, now wake up a little, and drink this.” She handed the Blood Replenishing potion to his lips, while being careful not holding him by any of his hurt spots, even if there were not much places left. Harry drank it unknowingly, and did the same with the Skele-gro. Knowing him, you could have discerned a flicker of recognition in his eyes, about the foul taste of the potion, but everyone was focused on his wounds.

As soon as Harry was taken care of and sleeping soundly, the three teachers and one healer turned towards the anxious-looking Dobby, and three strings of different questions were launched at the diminutive creature. Albus merely waited for a few seconds before interrupting with a tired smile.

“I believe our little friend can’t answer you three at the same time. If I may start?”

They reluctantly turned back to him and nodded, even the Potion Master. Severus Snape had never been fond of Harry, but he’d be damned if the condition he saw him in was attention-seeking. And he was intellectually curious about how the boy had been able to get himself into such a mess inside a protected school.

Dumbledore turned to Dobby. “So, I gather you are Dobby, Lucius Malfoy’s house elf? What are...”

“Oh no, great Dumbelydoor sir, Harry Potter sir made it so that Dobby be freed! Harry Potter is a great sir!”

“How could he do so?”

“Harry Potter sir give book to Mast... Lucius, and he give it to me and there’s a sock.”

Everybody was aghast. So, this boy did that to Lucius Malfoy?

“And what happened next?”

The house-elf was as agitated as always, and his uneasy voice was very high. "Mast... Dobby means, Lucius, bad man, bad bad man, draw his stick and scream. And green light goes. Harry Potter great sir jump around and run. Bad Lucius run behind and Dobby follow. Bad Lucius should not hurt great Harry Potter sir. The stick throws red and green and orange lights, and Harry Potter is hurt bad, but Harry Potter jump and run again. Bad Lucius run also and aim bad and destroy the tapestry of his mother. And Harry Potter run in the library, and..."

"Wait a minute!" Snape exclaimed. "What tapestry of Lucius mother? We don't hang Malfoy's family tapestries around here! Where were you?"

"Bad Lucius and Dobby going back to Malfoy's Manor but Harry Potter sir grabs Dobby before trip and fall there. Tripping with us is no good for a wizard. But Dobby didn't do it on purpose! Bad Dobby!" and he tried to ram his head into the bedpost, just before Albus prevented him and put him back in the tale.

"You were not at fault. But tell us what happened in the library?"

"Dobby not there first, but when in, Dobby see books falling everywhere, and the old shelves falling too. Dobby see Harry Potter sir in the books and a shelf is falling on good sir, so Dobby tries to help Harry Potter sir by tripping here but Dobby arrived too high and Harry Potter sir fell on the bed. When Dobby be punished?"

The people around him were speechless. That elf has been visibly abused by the Malfoys, for asking for punishment when he just saved Harry from a certain death. After shaking his head, Albus Dumbledore spoke again. "You see, Dobby, there is no need to punish you. You returned Harry Potter to us, and we are grateful for that. I understand you don't have an owner anymore, and for your magic not to diminish, I invite you to work for us at Hogwarts."

"Really, good sir?" Dobby's eyes were wider than usual and he looked amazed. "But Dobby not good enough to work for good sirs. Dobby saw kitchens. Kitchens are heaven here. Dobby rather be a good elf and stay with Harry Potter sir."

Albus smirked “Let’s make a deal, then, because you won’t be able to follow Harry into classes. You can work here, and go with Harry as he leaves school in some years. What do you think?”

Dobby’s eyes went right, and left, and right, and left... and he finally smiled widely and agreed.

“Very well then.” Albus rose, the interview quite finished. “One last question though: what happened to Mr Malfoy?”

Dobby turned his overly large eyes to Dumbledore and answered, shaking his head. “I not knowing, good sir. I not knowing.”

To be continued in next chapter: Recovery and Friends...

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## Chapter 2 – Recovery and friends

Feelings, returning little by little.

Consciousness.

A voice near him.

His bed, crispy sheets.

The voice, he knew this voice.

“...and Ron doesn't know of this, even if Hermione suspects something and I swear that if you don't wake up at some point, Harry, I'll never forgive...”

His hand was held by the softest thing, yet very wet also.

His bed? Crispy sheets? Smell of healing draught permeating the air?  
The hospital wing?

He groaned, eliciting a yelp from the voice. He opened his eyes to see the blurry Hospital wing – again – and the face of Ginny Weasley near his. Very near. So near he doesn't need glasses to see the tears on her freckles, even in the dark. Dark?

“You're awake!” Ginny sounded relieved. “Oh Harry, what did you do this time? Why are you always charging into danger? Dumbledore just told the rest that you were hurt and tired from the Chamber...” she trembled at the evocation of the place where she nearly died.

Harry tried to utter a sound, but only a croak emerged from his throat. Ginny smiled weakly through her tears, and prepared him a glass of water from the bed table. During her actions, Harry watched her intensely, and she almost fainted when his hand touched hers involuntarily, when he took the proffered glass. He drank a little, coughed, and drank some more. She handed him his glasses.

“Thanks.” he said.

"It's me that should thank you, Harry. But what did you do after the... the Chamber? You were not that hurt when we got out of it! I was awoken by a nightm... by a sound and couldn't sleep so I borrowed your invisibility cloak and came to talk to you. They say that even unconscious, you can hear the people around you." Harry's dad had left his invisibility cloak for him, and it had been returned to him by owl post on his first year. It was the artefact he and his friends had used the most to explore at night.

So, her nightmare was explaining the dark, since she had woken up and awakened him up at night time. Memory came back slowly, and he suddenly opened his eyes wide, inspected his own body and seemed to be in awe that it was not broken. He then watched around the room frantically. "Malfoy! Is Malfoy..."

"Shhhh, Harry. Nobody's here, but if you speak too loud, Madam Pomfrey will hear." Again, the softness against his hand. He watched, mesmerized, as it was due to her hand holding his. He had never felt something like that in his whole life. His friends had been friendly, and his Headmaster understanding, but this was more than that. It tugged to a subconscious part of him that was buried under years of neglect from his relatives, and it made him cry. He suddenly wanted to turn away from her, as his relatives always considered his tears like an insult, and he didn't want Ginny to feel insulted, especially by him. However, unable to let him go and somewhat feeling his unease, Ginny took hold of him, and hugged him like she would do any ill brother. They had shared painful experiences beyond anything people their age usually lived, and they were alive. They could understand each other.

After a few minutes, his tears mingled to hers on their shirts, they separated.

"Thanks, Ginny. Nobody..." but he stopped, wary of what he almost said. But it was too late, as her head shot up.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She started to understand the missing sentence, and it opened an avenue of new thoughts concerning Harry Potter. But she didn't press Harry on this subject, yet. There would be plenty of time when he would get out of the wretched infirmary. They stayed in companionable silence, holding hands, until Ginny broke it again. "Harry?"

"Mmm?" He was closing his eyes again.

"What were you saying about Malfoy?"

Startled, and wide awake now, Harry looked at her. "Is he... Do you... I mean... The papers?" This did not make any sense and he knew it. Collecting his thoughts, he asked "Do you have news about Malfoy?"

She looked at him inquisitively and answered "He got called at his home and left the school two days ago."

That hadn't been not the answer he expected, as he wanted information about Lucius, to see if he was dead or not. But her answer threw that thought process through the window.

"Two days?" He looked around him. Obviously, they were alone, but he hadn't noticed before that it meant that the petrified students were healed. "How long... How..." he didn't seem to be able to formulate the question, again.

"Harry, we escaped the Chamber a week ago, but Dumbledore told everybody that you were still recovering from your wounds there. Ron is oblivious to this because... well... I'm alive, and Hermione doesn't know what I know. But I don't know what happened after. I mean, you were not unconscious all that time. I should know, I was..." She stopped suddenly, paling, and lowered her head.

Harry removed his hand from hers, and took hold of her chin to raise it, and their eyes met.

"Are you okay, Ginny?"

She considered the question for a few seconds, before answering. "I'm fine, now."

They stayed in this situation for a few minutes, looking each other in the eyes, not fully understanding what was happening to them, until Harry broke the silence once more.

"I'll tell you. Sit here, you'll be better than staying on your knees; and it is a long story." He patted the bed next to him, and moved slightly to make place.

She hesitantly sat next to him, blushing again. After all, she had developed quite a crush on Harry Potter some years ago, when her mother used to read bedtimes stories about the Boy-Who-Lived. But she quickly forgot about her position when he told his tale. That took some time, during which she successively lived through the emotions he recounted. Then, Ginny updated him on the current stories in the school, especially the Headmaster's story about Harry recovery. Harry did not even know how he appeared on this bed, but he knew that his recovery had nothing to do with the basilisk's bite; Fawkes had made sure of that by healing him in the Chamber. They didn't even know if Dumbledore knew the true story of what had happened at Malfoy Manor, so they decided to keep the real story for themselves until they know the Headmaster's view on it.

Afterwards, they discussed about their memories from the elapsed year and their past. Harry had never felt so open to anyone, and Ginny was dumbfounded to discover the dark part of his past. He did not tell everything, of course, not wanting to attract pity or commiseration. For example, he did not tell her that his relatives locked him up for days without food. He did not tell her that his uncle did beat him frequently, yelling that all his problems were Harry's fault. He was feeling so shameful for his past that he couldn't tell everything at once. Besides, he was learning about Ginny, too: how the passenger seat of her own mind was quite uncomfortable, for example. Especially when Voldemort was driving. She even told him, blushing, that her mother had been telling her stories about him since she was old enough to remember, and probably even before.

When they finished talking, several hours later, the sun was rising and lighting the wing with promises for a new day. They had made themselves comfortable at one point, and were now lying face to face on the bed. Still tired from his wounds, Harry went to sleep at some point while holding hands with her, a smile on his face. As Madam Pomfrey was going to be up soon, Ginny got up, looked at him, removed his glasses to put them on the nightstand and, without understanding herself, kissed him on the cheek. Even in his slumber, his smile widened, and he mumbled "Gin..."

Blushing, but happy like never before, she fastened the invisibility cloak around her, and threw a last glance to Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Boy-She-Had-A-Crush-On, the Boy-Who-Saved-Her, and now the Boy-She-Might-Love. Even if they were both young, their feelings towards each other were blossoming into something which outweighed the relationship between each of them towards their respective friends. Then she was gone. Same place, the next day...

Harry didn't wake up for most of the following day, but the smile Madam Pomfrey found on his face that morning gave away some clues about his recovery, and in the late afternoon, when he stirred from the remains of his sleep, there were some people around him almost instantly.

"Good afternoon, Harry."

Harry tried to raise, startled, but the wrinkled hand of his Headmaster gently pushed him back in his pillows, and gave him his glasses.

"Shh, shh, you are still feeble and recovering. Don't exert yourself, you slept the whole week."

Harry was not quite agreeing, as he was feeling quite well. Strangely, he felt better and stronger after the prolonged visit to the Hospital wing, but he put that on the draughts' account. He also figured that the Headmaster was not aware of Ginny's previous visit. Or was he? Nobody could figure the extent of knowledge behind the old man's twinkling eyes. Now that he had his glasses on, able to take a good

look around, he also noticed the persons accompanying his Headmaster: Madam Pomfrey, Professors McGonagall and Snape, Fawkes the phoenix perched on his nightstand, his friends Ron and Hermione, and Ginny behind Hermione. She seemed flustered to be so far from him, but they could not lie in bed like the previous night in front of everyone, could they? Everybody looked relieved though even, strangely, Professor Snape, who was not wearing his trademark scowl now.

“Errrm... Hi?” Harry said tentatively.

His friend Hermione was the first to react, launching herself on him, disturbing the nightstand and Fawkes, who trilled indignantly. She enveloped him in a hug that, would it not be broken by Madam Pomfrey, would have been dangerous to Harry’s health. “Harry, you got us so concerned, after that Basilisk bite, you had to recover, but you spent the whole week unconscious...”

“Relax, Mione” Harry interrupted, and raised his arms to hug her too “I’m alright, see?”

Ron approached after Hermione, displaying less but feeling at least as much as her. He shook his friend’s arm and, in a shaking voice, said “Good to see you up and about, mate... I mean... not up yet, but...”

Harry gently laughed at his friend discomfort “Not a problem, Ron. In fact, I’m sure I can get up if you people did not restrain me down.” This elicited a giggle from Ginny, quickly stifled when he turned towards her.

“And how are you doing now, Ginny?” He asks with a twinkle of his own in his eyes.

“Better, thanks.” she says demurely.

Ron laughed at her attitude, reminiscing about Ginny’s previous reactions to Harry’s presence. He didn’t know that it was simulated, and pushed her towards Harry. “Go sis, hug him too, Merlin knows you want it.”

Ginny hugged Harry gently for a few seconds and when they separated, they both seemed to speak with their eyes. Madam Pomfrey started to speak but Harry was lost in Ginny's hair scent and did not notice.

"I'm sorry?"

Poppy repeated. "I'd like to give you some more potions now that you are awake, and you will have to spend the remaining week in bed to adjust to them."

"A week?"

"Yes."

"But..."

"No but, young man, you were unconscious for a week, and your magic was exhausted, you have to recover properly now."

"I'm fine!"

"No you are not!"

Harry was feeling tied down now and, angrily, he demanded "How do you know?"

During this quick exchange, Harry's friends chuckled about it. It was well known that Harry did not like spending his time in the Hospital wing, as he was already visiting it on a regular basis. And it was also well-known that Poppy Pomfrey was stubborn to keep her charges in bed.

"Very well then, we'll see that." the Hospital matron answered and, after drawing her wand, started to cast several spells. She frowned.

"What?" almost everyone was looking at her at that point, and her frown was not lost.

She didn't answer, though, and continued to mutter spells, but it seemed to Harry that it was the same incantation, at least two more times after the first. She then looked at her wand in disbelief for a second, and stored it away.

"What is it, Poppy?" the Headmaster enquired.

She snorted, and said "He's alright, only hungry. It's strange that..."

As if on cue, Harry's stomach grumbled and everyone laughed, except the two severe Heads of House, whose smirks were significantly more than either of them generally showed towards their students.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't deterred, though. "You will still spend the night here, Harry, and if you are fine tomorrow morning, you'll take breakfast with everyone."

Harry reflected for half a second. "Fair enough. Deal?"

"Deal." answered Madam Pomfrey before realizing that she just struck a deal with her charge, thus sounding her equal, whereas she generally had the upper hand on everything happening in her ward. Huffing, even if in a humorous way, she turned heels and went back to her apartment. "I'll be in there if you need me. You lot," she said, turning to point to Harry's friends "make sure you leave before curfew."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey. Thank you." they answered, almost at the same time. Satisfied that she hadn't lost her authority to students other than Harry, she left the room.

Albus Dumbledore approached Harry "I'll ask for a house-elf to bring your evening meal here, Harry. Rest well, and we'll see you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Headmaster, professor McGonagall."

McGonagall's lips curved in a tiny smile and she nodded. "Good evening Mr Potter".

"Thanks, Fawkes." Harry said as the phoenix flew to the Headmaster's shoulder and trilled from there.

Snape looked at Harry intently and, approaching his side, took a potion out of his pocket. "This is a Dreamless Sleep draught, Potter. Drink it after your meal, so that you'll sleep well tonight. I don't want you making mistakes tomorrow, do I?" At that, Ron looked towards Hermione and rolled his eyes.

"Thanks, Professor." Harry said, stunned, as the last adults left the room.

As soon as Snape was out of earshot, Ron muttered "Blimey, he has a way of crawling into my skin..."

Quick as a snitch, Harry answered "Like a spider, Ron?"

Ron paled "Don't even mention it! Never again!"

Everyone else laughed, though.

Calmed, Ron was still going on "I still think the greasy git was..."

"Honestly, Ron!" Hermione interrupted. "That was kind of him to give Harry the potion, and..."

Ron cut her "If it is even the good one! He could poison Harry!"

Harry took the potion, lifted the lid and sniffed, then closed it, putting it back on the nightstand. He smiled. "No it's the good one."

"How do you know? Since when are you an expert in potions?"

"Since I drink so much of them around this room, Ron. I know this one."

"Still..." Ron started, but he was interrupted by Ginny, who was sitting on the bed and had taken Harry's hand in hers. "Professor Snape is less a git than he was before" she said absently.

“But... how do you know... what are you doing holding hands?”

Hermione snorted “He’s recovering, Ron. If you had eyes, you’d see that I, too, am holding his hand. And Ginny’s right about Professor Snape. Last lesson, he didn’t call me a know-it-all,” she blushed, before continuing, “and he didn’t remove points to Gryffindor, even when Neville clanked his cauldron on the table.”

“I’d be happy if it stays that way.” Harry said from the bed and, turning to Ron, added “And, mate, if I had one more hand, you could hold it for sure, but I thought you didn’t swing that way?”

Ron blushed suddenly and stuttered briefly before realizing he had been had. “Nah, sure.” and his stomach agreed, making everyone laugh. “Well, Harry, we’ll go now. I’m starving and I hope your meal will be here shortly. Rest well, mate.”

“Yes, Harry. No more night exploring now.” Hermione sternly added, while Ron, behind her, rolled his eyes. Harry was sometimes sure that Hermione had the ability to channel her Transfiguration Professor.

“Ginny?” asked Ron to his sister, who was still holding Harry’s hand.

“I’ll stay with Harry for a few minutes, go forward.”

“I’m sure Harry is well and doesn’t need a kid keeping him company right now, right mate?”

“I’m not a kid anymore,” she answered with a dangerous edge in her voice “and we will talk for a bit.”

“Ron, come on. Meal is ready.” Hermione interjected, obviously sensing one of Ron’s big-mouthed troubles coming, and trying to lure him outside using his stomach. It generally worked fine.

“Right, right. I’m starving. But why is she staying?”

She pushed him through the infirmary doors, with a last glance to Harry and Ginny, who were talking, oblivious to them.

“Shh, Ron. Surely they want to talk about the Chamber and...” the rest was lost to the pair still in the ward, but they weren’t listening anyway.

“I’m not staying long now, but I can go back tonight if you want me to...” Ginny started, suddenly unsure of herself, and looking at the floor.

“I’d like that, Gin.”

She didn’t look up immediately, frowning, and removed her hand from his. Harry began to think he did upset her, but she went straight to the nightstand that had been disturbed by Hermione earlier, and picked up a book from the floor.

“What is this?”

“I don’t know, you found it...” Harry started, but suddenly remembered the book from Malfoy’s library, and gasped. She turned towards him, curious.

“I took it from there, from Malfoy...”

“It is surely evil then” she exclaimed and dropped it suddenly. Her experience with evil books was too recent for her to pick it up again, even when Harry tried to placate her.

“I think not, it felt good when I did hold it.”

“The d... diary felt good also, at the beginning.” she started to cry. “Promise me you’ll be careful? Extra-careful?” She looked up at him, and there was such worry and protectiveness in her eyes that he was lost for a moment, before silently agreeing. On the spot, Harry promised himself not to joke about books and diaries with her, for a long time. He brought his hand to her face, wiping her tears with his thumb. She whimpered at his contact and closed her eyes.

“I’ll be fine, Gin. I’ll be careful.” Some more minutes passed. “When do you want to come tonight?” he whispered.

“Around nine, I think. I’ll pretend going early to bed, and I’ll lock my bed curtains before coming here with your cloak. You’re not annoyed for me to use it? I recall it was your dad’s?”

“Yes it was, but you can use it all the same. You should go to the Great Hall, or Ron will pound me.”

“Yes, that insensitive prat.” she smiled.

“See you at nine then.”

“Yes.” she answered softly, seeming not to move for some seconds, then leaving the ward quietly.

To be continued in next chapter: The Legacy...

O, young love, untarnished,  
O, our Lord, unblemished,  
We shall hope they continue  
But for that, I’d like review.

## Chapter 3 – The Legacy

Harry didn't move for a few minutes, watching the ceiling, before bending over the bed's edge, and picking up the book from the floor. It didn't glow anymore but, curiously, it seemed to Harry that the book belonged to him. He opened it a crack, in case it was howling or biting like some of the worst books of the Restricted Section of Hogwarts' Library. It wasn't. So he began to read the first page, intrigued by the obviously hand-written introduction.

Dear descendant,

As I am nearing the end of my life, I put together everything of importance I discovered and which is not documented in any other book. As to put away those snakes, I also charmed this book so that only my blood will be recognized by it. Others won't be able to read it; it will be blank to them. On page 3, you'll find a spell to transform its appearance so that other people will think they read some book or another, your choice.

I hope you find interesting the information this book provides, I sure enjoyed myself writing it. Even if my reputation preceded me and a prank or two is good for your health, I didn't prank the book. But you can find prank recipes everywhere in the book. Sorry for the lack of order, but these recipes I write as they come. Besides, this book is short, but it's packed to the brim with useful information. Feel free to prank your friends, as well as your enemies! Merlin knows Salazar hated me for these...

You will also find that you'll only have to read this book once, all its content will be dumped into your mind through our blood link. You'll never forget it, literally! Be sure to keep it in a safe place for your descendants too!

Yours truly,

Godric Gryffindor

Harry's head was swimming, and it wasn't only because of his lack of food. That one page he read was changing all his perspective of

himself. He was not the worthless freak his relatives always told him he was. He was not only the Boy-Who-Lived. He was a descendant of Gryffindor!

A crack in front of him startled him and he almost dropped the book, but he hid it quickly under his covers while looking at the house-elf that just appeared in front of him with a platter of food.

“Dobby!”

“Harry Potter sir!”

Harry was delighted to see that the house-elf, previously clad in rags, was now harbouring the distinctive uniform of Hogwarts house-elves. Not all house-elves are despised by their owners, and the population of healthy and content servants was an asset for the school inner workings.

“It’s good to see you, Dobby. I see that Professor Dumbledore hired you.”

Dobby scrunched his face then answered quickly “Yes he did, Harry Potter sir. Now good sir must eat because he is hungry.”

Missing the face Dobby made, because he was effectively famished, Harry wolfed down the slices of beef roast and the accompanying vegetables, drowning them with pumpkin juice. He then tore through the cheese at the same speed, and slowed down only when half-way through the strawberry cake. Dobby was impressed. “Is Harry Potter sir needing something else? Dobby can bring pudding or sandwiches too.”

Harry laughed. It feels good to laugh, he reflected. “Yes Dobby, I’d like that, thanks. If not right now, I may be hungry again later.”

While Harry finished his cake and juice, Dobby had fetched said items and, after a little chit-chat, he left Harry for the night. Harry looked at his watch and, seeing that he got at least a full hour before meeting Ginny – something he was eagerly waiting to – he decided to read some more of the book. It seemed to be written without a plan in

mind, and started by just listing interesting and mundane stuff alike, such as anniversary dates for some unknown people. As he read, Harry felt his mind absorbing the given data like a sponge. For instance, after reading the first three pages, he felt that he could cast the spell to change the book's appearance. Trusting that nobody would find strange a copy of Quidditch through the Ages on his nightstand, he gave that book's title, look, and content to his ancestor's diary. To him, though, only the cover had changed. 'Of course', he reflects, 'you have to remember to speak about the same book to your friends.'

The following pages were speaking about animagus transformation, and his interest was piqued. He didn't know anything about that beforehand but, curiously, the concept of escaping the down-to-earth reality called to him, and the few examples of birds caught his interest. Closing his eyes, he already envisioned himself flying across the country, with powerful thrusts against the winds. His mane would be flowing in the wind like his hair was doing when he was on a broom, something he liked very much. Wait a second here! Since when do birds have manes? He didn't have time to ponder this, as the infirmary door opened quietly and closed as well, without anyone being seen entering. He stored his book away, and the next thing he knew, Ginny Weasley was shedding his Invisibility cloak away and sitting on the bed next to him. They started to discuss gently about things, the Chamber, and more things. Speaking like this, without hindrances, seemed to do both some good, healing their psychological wounds. Harry didn't speak about the book, though, because he wanted to read it all before speaking to his friends about it. After two hours of quiet chat, they decided to turn in for the night, and gently gave each other a hug. But, when Ginny left the ward, Harry's eyes involuntarily turned towards the book and a curious feeling of expectation took hold of him. He grabbed the book and continued to read.

Apparently, Godric Gryffindor had made interesting discoveries about people changing forms. Whereas most people thought that the animagus self-transfiguration is a natural talent that you get from your parents, he proved that it was possible, for someone not able initially, to train to gain that skill. Of course, the whole process was easier for someone with the proper genes. The training process was described

also. Going further, Godric showed that an animagus can also train to get more than one animal form, but explained that it was very difficult to achieve. All his research on these topics was explained in the book, and was so groundbreaking at that time that no other book spoke about it.

Then, the research had been oriented towards metamorphmagi, wizards and witches that are able to change their facial features, and, to a less extent, their body. Drawing parallels between the two techniques, the research made by Gryffindor finally described a global and unifying theory, as well as practise exercises to become a shape shifter. That would be the ultimate achievement in self-transfiguration. Attempts had also been made towards self-transfiguration into objects and back, but the main problem of an object generally not having a conscious mind did cut the research short. After all, if you transformed into a mere chair, how did the chair know how to turn back? That's why the next few pages dealt more on object charming, and more specifically, how to give a conscience and movement to objects. That part had been made in partnership with other wizards and witches, especially Godric's founder mates Helga Hufflepuff and Rowena Ravenclaw. 'Perhaps that cooperation made that charmed objects are current around the magical world.' Harry assumed silently. 'After all, Gryffindor is better known for his bravery than for his magical research. I just can't wait to tell the others about the shape shifting part!'

Briefly glancing at his watch, Harry realized that time had flid while he was reading, and decided to stop where he was and sleep for the remaining few hours of the night. Still hungry, he finished his sandwiches and pudding, once again wondering at his renewed appetite, before curling up and preparing for sleep. But the exhilaration of reading Gryffindor's innovative discoveries and numerous prank recipes was such that Harry wasn't able to sleep peacefully now. So, after turning around in his bed for some time, Harry took one half of the Dreamless Sleep Draught before going back to sleep, this time.

Around the same time, in a Ministry facility...

Kingsley Shacklebolt was happy. He was an Auror, a law-enforcement officer appointed by the Ministry of Magic. And, as his personal file indicated, he was also a veteran of many battles, and currently in charge of the Cleansing team in London. The Cleansing team had nothing to do with the tidiness of the roads, but rather the elimination of pests. Such pests included small and large groups of generally underground, generally malevolent, and sometimes powerful creatures. The previous mission had successfully destroyed a werewolf nest, and all the raging beasts had been captured. As they were uncontrollable all the time, the three true werewolves had been killed. The bitten werewolves, only sensitive to the full moon, were currently being questioned under some truth serums to check if they could be released. The current Ministry policy was to file them, and if they were not guilty of anything, release them with a potion to be taken near the full moon to avoid the effects of it, and addresses where to get more of that potion. If any werewolf was caught free in his wolf state, he was killed without warning, so the potion was an asset to these werewolves' own health, as well as the one of the general public. Still, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, was trying to pass laws to kill any and all werewolf, unsuccessfully yet.

So, Kingsley Shacklebolt, head of the Cleansing team, was happy. But not only because the whole werewolf operation success: the following important operation, involving a group of vampires freshly arrived from abroad, was advancing fast. One of their contacts, a shoddy underground barman named Cody Hardmak, had spotted new faces with pointy teeth earlier on, and that called for action. Kingsley was considering several personal files opened before him, all from Aurors not currently on the field, and he finally chose four of them. As the action has to be immediate, he called for the four chosen Aurors using a magical device called a Comtact. That device served the same goal as post owls, but was quicker, and notified recipients mentally, thus silently and without alerting visual effect. It also awakened them if they are asleep. The communication was one-way, though, and only to be used for emergencies. As most Ministry-controlled artefacts, they also were only released to Aurors. Writing the names of the four chosen Aurors on the Comtact, he sent them a meeting room address. By doing so, he knew that the Ministry anti-Apparation wards around that very meeting room would be lowered for these persons to enter and exit once, a very useful function of the

Contact. He smiled. Knowing those four, he should get to the meeting room quickly or they would arrive before him. He fetched the mission file, exited his office, and headed there.

As he opened the room's door, he noticed that almost all of them were already there and seated. 'I'm getting old', he reflected; 'only one is missing'. He closed the door as the last Auror, a young witch with vibrant blue hair, apparated in the room and tripped on the last chair, before seating, blushing.

"Nymphadora Tonks" he said, half-calling the roll, half-mocking her clumsiness. Still, being the only Auror metamorphmagus, her presence in such missions was always an asset, as you never knew when you had to impersonate an enemy. She raised her hand.

"Stuart Lengley" a stocky bald man with a leather jacket raised his hand. His face was scarred from previous battles, and he constantly wore square sunglasses. Few people had ever seen his eyes, and he never smiled either, because his eyes and teeth were an indication of his rare origins, something he had been ashamed about a long time ago. Nowadays, he was more at ease about his part-goblin blood, mainly because the endurance it gave him allowed him to survive many encounters.

"John von Libbrecht" a perfect contrast to the previous Auror called, the tall and wiry frame of John raised a manicured hand. His dirty blonde hair was falling over piercing blue eyes, and his business-looking suit could have impressed any low-class meddler. He had been raised in a noble household and, despite being disowned because of a dark affair he hadn't wanted to take part in, he was still very meticulous about his own person.

"Melinda Thomson" despite her English name, the little Auror had every Asian physical aspect, including a sophisticated-looking kimono. Suspecting an urgent mission, she had taken her katana with her already, and was tying it to her belt when her name was called. Raising her head, she merely nodded to her superior and finished the complicated knot.

“Thank you for coming. You understood the urgency. Here is the file.” Kingsley said as he was duplicating the mission file with a temporary spell. No need to lose important files to prying eyes, and these professionals would memorise the file anyway.

“Our contacts in Albania then in France told us of a group of vampires, directed by an elder, wanting to put a foot on our grounds. They are particularly violent, and we noticed a few new vampire-related crimes from Dover to London. Our suburb sources found them at the address given in your file. It’s a very shoddy block, near a dump, so beware for external problems. So far, only two vampires have arrived, but if we cut their base, the following travelling bats will be shot down by our friends. You are to report to me when finished, or if any unexpected opposition arises. Any question?”

They understood. They were formed for this, and they already accomplished this kind of mission. No question was asked, and they raised and salute as Kingsley got out of the room. “That crack team will destroy these vampires” he thought “each of them is able to handle twice as many. Except Tonks, but she lacks only the experience.” While confident on that mission’s success, he couldn’t prevent a small shiver while moving between offices, and stopped a full minute beside an innocuous wall poster about recycling. Back in Hogwarts’ hospital wing...

Having taken only half of the potion, Harry woke up fresh and proper just when Madam Pomfrey got out of her apartment. The only indication of his nightly activities was a mild headache, certainly due to his intensive reading. Casting the diagnostic spells, Poppy Pomfrey noticed the headache, but everything else was in order. As a result, she gave him a white bubbling glass of potion to relieve his headache, before sending him to breakfast. Just as he was ready to leave, though, his book held firmly in his arms, he was mildly surprised to see Albus Dumbledore entering the room.

“Good morning, Harry.”

“Good morning, Headmaster. Is there anything I can do for you?”

"No, thanks, but I wanted to have a little chat with you before you meet other students."

Harry thought for a second, and then looked up his Headmaster expectantly. "Is this about what you told the other students about me?"

Dumbledore chuckled "Exactly. Insightful this morning, are we?"

Harry blushed "Well, Gin... I mean, my friends told me that you told them my recovery was because of the basilisk, but it's not true, is it?"

"Well..."

"And I saw Dobby yesterday, so I think that, before hiring him, you asked him to tell the story."

"My my my... you really are insightful this morning, Harry."

"Well, you know, it's just adding clues."

"Right on one, Harry. I did that, but feared that you might risk retribution from... certain students... if the truth was to be told. If you could keep your story to your close friends, though, I would not appear crazier than I already do."

"I'll do that, sir."

"About the story, are there details I can get from you that Dobby didn't tell me about? As for why you did this at all, for instance."

"It wasn't my intention to leave for Malfoy's place, but Dobby brought me there through his own magic." Harry grimaced "Quite painful, this one."

"Yes. The house-elves have their own branch of magic, but it's not the same as the magic we human wield. Personally, I have never travelled that way before, but hearing your recollection of it, I think I'd abstain. Other details?"

“Well, I think Dobby told you I made so he was freed?”

“Yes, and it was quite a risky move too... I wonder if standard school punishments could give you some sense to avoid danger, but I recall that the school year is ending. Besides,” he continued, raising his hand to forestall Harry’s stuttering “it’s not like you go for the action, rather the other way around.”

Harry’s gaze fell to the floor, and he muttered “As if I have the choice.”

“Still, you decided to grab Dobby and landed out there. So that one is on you, Harry. But we could continue for hours, and I thank you for freeing an obviously abused house-elf. Anything else?”

Harry shook his limbs “I got hit by curses, but it seems I healed correctly. And I don’t recall Dobby entering Malfoy’s library right after me so... I got there and Mr Malfoy followed and started to curse around. The books and shelves were falling and... and that’s all, I think. I was so badly wounded already that I think I fainted. I gather that Dobby found me and got me here?”

“Right again. Still, nothing transpired from Malfoy Manor since then. I only had a call from Narcissa requesting that her son return there three days ago.” the Headmaster began to think aloud “Perhaps Lucius doesn’t want the outside world to know about you acq... erm... freeing his house-elf. I don’t know.”

They both fell into a thoughtful silence, Harry thinking about his brief and involuntary exploration of Malfoy Manor, and Albus reflecting about Harry’s talent to get himself into trouble. The headmaster broke the silence after a few minutes.

“Well, Harry, I asked for a friend of mine to check on young Ginevra because of her trials this year, and I’ll ask him to do the same with you.” Harry’s eyes lifted to meet his. “His name is Remus Lupin, and he will meet you once per week. I’ll owl to inform you of the schedule and the meeting place once you get home.” Harry grimaced at this. Now that he knew Hogwarts, he couldn’t think of his relatives’ house as his home. The wretched people, called relatives, that lived there

made the place look like an emotional dump. The grimace wasn't seen by the Headmaster, as he continued speaking. "You will see that you can ask him about anything, especially your family."

Harry looked up, startled. "My... my family, sir?" It had been a quest of sorts for Harry, for as long as he remembered, to get information about his parents. His relatives had told him that they were good-for-nothing freaks like him, and that they had died in a car accident, but that last part had always been said uncomfortably, and they had never said anything else. Albus Dumbledore didn't know all that but, still, he knew what lied in the Mirror of Erised when Harry was looking at it last year. Harry has seen himself and his parents. So, in Harry's opinion, the Headmaster could at least have told him some of the story by himself. After all, as their Headmaster in their time, he should know things.

"Yes Harry. Remus was a good friend to your parents', and I feel that he may tell you interesting stories about their youth."

Harry's eyes were watering already, his previous thoughts totally forgotten. "Thank you! Thank you, sir."

Seeing that they were finished discussing, the Headmaster turned back towards the door, and looked to Harry expectantly. "Will you join the rest of us for breakfast, Harry?"

"Oh! Oh yes, I'm famished."

"Which growing young man isn't? Though young Ronald seems to beat everyone at this." Albus chuckled.

"Yes" Harry answered as humorously as his professor, just before following him through the door. "Yes he is."

They entered the Great Hall together and, as they directed themselves to their own place, Harry wasn't able to miss the sudden silence spreading through the hall, followed by urgent whispers and people nodding in his direction. "Great," he thought, "the rumour mill is crazy as ever." Still, it didn't sound as hostile as the beginning of the year, when everybody was thinking he was the new Dark Lord in

making. As he passed the Hufflepuff table, Susan Bones, a second year blond girl, stood up and went to shake his hand.

“Congratulations on your recovery, Harry. Thank you.”

He blinked at her, not understanding.

Luna Lovegood, one of Ginny’s year mates, rose from the Ravenclaw table, and headed towards them. “I always thought that only you could get us rid of that cockatrix, Harry.” she uttered dreamily.

“It wasn’t a cockatrix, it was a...”

“Whatever.” she answered, true to her reputation of semi madness.

Terry Boot, another year mate of Harry’s, stood also, and patted him on the back. “Don’t play modesty, Harry; everyone knows what you did for the school and your resulting illness. Thank you, too.” he started to clap his hands, looking at the students seating at the Hufflepuff table, who joined him immediately. Soon, the whole hall was booming with the clapping of students’ and even teachers’ hands. Only some Slytherins did not participate, even when their Head of House was applauding politely.

Harry was speechless, and after the clapping died down, he could only mutter a vague “t’was nothing” as the three students seated themselves again. Numbly, he resumed his walk towards Gryffindor table and took his usual seat in front of his friends, barely registering that Ginny had changed her usual seating arrangements and was now right next to him. He was still famished, though, and started to tear through his already filled plate.

Already filled?

He stopped and inspected his plate, only to find his favourite food on it, and his favourite beverage in the glass in front of him. Curious, he casts a glance at his friends. Hermione looked back at him pointedly, with laughing in their eyes; whereas Ron was looking to his right, with a frown. Turning right, Harry was pleasantly surprised to find the familiar face of Ginny mere inches from his own, and looking back

with a smile. After a few moments, during which a chuckle was heard from Hermione, and a snort Ron, Harry gathered his wits, and flashed a big grin to Ginny.

“Thanks, Gin.”

“I thought you were hungry after your long convalescence, so I filled your plate. That way,” she added with a twinkle in her eye “you wouldn’t be late for your lessons.”

“Well... thanks, Gin.”

Hermione chuckled again. “My, aren’t we talkative today, Harry?”

Harry turned back to her, and threw her a pointed look, smiling, before tucking in. He really was starving, and even with Ginny’s helping, he was still hungry. After a second, then a third service, his friends were quite stunned, as it wasn’t customary for him to eat as much.

Ron grinned. “Way to go, mate! Next breakfast, we’ll start at the same time and we’ll see who can ingest the most.”

Pausing to swallow a whole glass of pumpkin juice, as he doesn’t want to spread his mouthful around the table like Ron sometimes did, Harry answered. “As you wish. But I think that, after replenishing my batteries from this week of lying down, I won’t eat as much as now.”

Ron frowned “What’s your bat-her-eez?”

Harry and Hermione seemed lost for a second, then laughed merrily. “Muggle technology, Ron.” Hermione explained “When Harry will have his normal energy level back, he won’t need as much food as right now, that’s what it means.”

“Oh... Ok, then.”

Harry checked his watch and, startled, stood up brusquely and stuttered “I need to get my books for Potions or I’ll be...”

“Skinned alive?” Ron interrupted, grinning. Then he and Hermione picked something on the floor, giving it to him. It was his school bag.

“I packed it for today, mate.” Ron said.

“Wouldn’t want you to miss a beat.” Hermione chirped.

As they prepared themselves for another day of lessons, Harry felt a tentative touch on his right hand. Turning right, he grasped Ginny’s hand and, leaning to her ear, whispered “Have a good morning, we’ll see each other later.” before kissing her quickly on the cheek. They both blushed, and separated. The whole scene had been caught by Hermione, while Ron, nose in his bag, was oblivious.

Minutes later, as the trio descended the stairs towards the Potion classroom, Hermione couldn’t refrain from singing a romantic tune under her breath, while stealing glances towards Harry. Ron was speaking about Quidditch, and about the fact that their Potion professor was still a greasy git. And Harry was thoughtful, ignoring his friends’ antics. Actually, the Potion class seemed interesting, comparing to the previous ones. Without Draco to make fun of Harry and his friends, the Slytherin were quite silent, and professor Snape seemed less prone to take points from Gryffindor. All in all, the day was starting well.

To be continued in next chapter: Up, up, and Away...

The boy got a wealth in word,  
Left by his kind ancestor,  
The thing yours truly would want:  
A review, or if you can’t...

## Chapter 4 – Up, up, and away

“I’m through! I quit!” The large bellowing man was red and puffing from his yelling.

His superior, however, a little man in his early fifties, stayed calm. “You are not quitting. We fired you. Since we took control of your company three years ago, I told you countless times to stop drinking and harassing your young employees. You were even caught stealing money from the charity box. We lost some really big contracts because of you, and...”

“It wasn’t my fault! I swear! It was that wretched...”

“Enough is enough! We don’t want our reputation anymore soiled by your actions. As you were warned way beforehand, our contract stipulates that you won’t receive any form of compensation from your job loss. Now you have one hour to get your personal belongings from your office, under the supervision of Rufus here, then you’ll hand your keys and access card to him.” he waved at a man who was standing at the door. Both men eyed each other. They were the same bulk, but Rufus was all muscle, and his scarred face inspired fear.

Deciding that forcing his way was not working, the fat man whined “You can’t throw me away, sir, I gave my energy to the company, all these years. I have a family to feed...”

The little man sneered. “A family, yes indeed. We sent them job application forms the previous week, for them to join us if they so wished, but your wife did not answer and your son replied with all sort of... naughty comments, on the form. We called and your wife thought useless to work for us. Now you will take your responsibilities, and head back home. Now.”

“Please, it wasn’t my fault...”

“Now!”

Seeing that he was beat, and couldn't exert physical revenge because of the brute at the door, the fat man left, pounding his way through the huge building, and followed by a silent Rufus. In a large bedroom, a young scholar was reading...

He couldn't make out all the content of the text, but he was learning it nonetheless. After the first part, as interesting and immediately usable as it was, it rapidly digressed into family lines and blood feuds. Such stories were for the kids, he thought, and he felt no need to read them. But he did, as he was instructed to, a long time ago. The weirdest stuff he read was about magic power held by humans who were neither wizards nor witches. Reading that part, he reflected about the legends his friends knew and shared with him on the occasion, and one struck him with the similarities. Was it possible that this kind of power existed then? Could it exist now?

...and they seem to possess a mastery over the natural elements. There is no proof that it could be learnt because they seldom appear to the outside world, much like we do for muggles. Every occurrence of seeing their power was promptly hidden. I devoured Rowena's library on this topic and found naught. What troubles me the most is that some members of seemingly random wizarding families disappeared after demonstrating that power. The account is never clear...

At last! I managed to personally interrogate the witness of such a disappearing. The man is distraught so it's easy to slip him some mild truth serum. He's a wizard, and will notice if I give him anything stronger. As it is, I believe he'll take his spillings onto his distress. Man, was I for a discovery!

They do exist. His wife was one, but without wizarding talent, we don't distinguish them apart from muggles. When their son was eleven, she took him away, for 'proper' education. He tells me that they fought over this because the child, being a crossbreed, had the potential of both talents, if properly educated and trained. But, as he loved her, he gave in, not understanding that he wasn't to see either of them again. Three years had passed, and he's nearing nervous breakdown; he practically begs me to wipe his memory. So I do.

Reading this, he was mildly surprised that the author had been able to do so without a second thought. After all, that was a very Slytherin thing to do. It led to interesting questions about last year's ceremony in September and what that wretched decider told him. Unfortunately, any research concerning blood lines at that time had to dig for dirty secrets and the methods were always straightforward. Quieting his qualms, he read again, to the light of his wand in the big, dark bedroom. Besides, he had to finish the text soon.

I started to observe closely all magical children around age eleven to see if they develop that weird talent, focusing on those having at least one muggle parent. I think I can safely ignore some blood lines in my quest. The De Male Foi elder, on that regard, is always seeking pure wizarding blood. I wonder if they will be able to continue for long, as consanguinity inexorably leads to squibness. I try to hide the real aim of my quest to everyone, especially that old snake. So far, I noticed eight kids with what I'm searching, and three of them confirmed it in front of reliable witnesses.

- Name: Tina Smalridge, age 10

Lives: Salisbury

Father: Thomas Smalridge, muggle navigator

Mother: Carolyn Felton, witch dedicated to her little family

Siblings: 2 little brothers, ages 7 and 5, both magical

Head: blonde hair and aquamarine eyes

Personality: bright

Incidents: levitation

- Name: Josh O'Malley, age 11

Lives: Glendalough, Ireland

Father: Muircheartach O'Malley, muggle blacksmith

Mother: Maud Clarke, muggle barmaid

Siblings: none

Head: fiery red hair and blue eyes

Personality: hot-tempered

Incidents: pyromania

- Name: William Clover, age 8

Lives: Haddington, Scotland

Father: Donald Clover, deceased wizard  
Mother: Mary McLeish, muggle money lender  
Siblings: a sister, age 6, non-magical  
Head: brown hair and eyes  
Personality: quiet  
Incidents: gardening

I wrote down everything about them so that I can find them later, or even their kids. A parent written as 'muggle' may be one of those people. Listed incidents are usual for accidental magic, but these kids are doing it consciously and stay in control, without a wand. The 'muggle' parents seem wary of me, but I have a plan. They can't really object when I invite their kids to Hogwarts for an open-doors day, can they? I don't want for such people to 'abduct' ours, even with the best intentions, so I think I'll mark them one way or another. Personal or blood?

The remaining two inches of the page were blank, except for a hastily written paragraph:

Two years have passed, and I was right. They took all eight kids away, and some others that I didn't notice disappeared as well. Same scenario each time, the kid and the muggle parent disappear. Sometimes both parents too. No body, no witness. But I'm sure to find their lines again, as I did bloodmark the eight children I knew when they visited, though, with a different symbol for the three I was sure of...

He couldn't make heads or tails of that last paragraph, especially from the marking stuff, but supposed that there would be more information about that in a future page. With a brief look at his watch which read half an hour past midnight, he hid the book under his mattress and drank half his remaining draught before turning the light off and curling in his bed. He would have time tomorrow night for the last fifty pages. Even if the whole thing wasn't as organized as his bookworm friend would like it, reading it was fun, and memorizing it was easy. His last conscious thought was that, because of this randomness, his friend would certainly find it more difficult to memorize than him, and he went to sleep with an amused smile on his face.

Hogwarts library, on the last day of school...

The last week of school went smoothly, with the infamous trio getting a fourth member between classes, in the person of Ginny Weasley. She and Harry were seen chatting all the time, sometimes laughing their heads off about some pranks, and other times in tears. All Gryffindor knew what they had been through, so they didn't dare to interrupt. Only Ron was sulking about it.

"Honestly, Ron! Why are you so moody?" inquired Hermione, seeing her red-headed friend stomping through the library entrance. Even on the last day of school, she was reading at the library. She liked the stillness and the power of knowledge around her, just asking to be read.

"What's it with Harry and Ginny?" He retorted "She's my little sister, and he's acting as if he's dating her!"

"Shh, Ron. Besides, when people are dating, that implies both of them agree, don't you think?"

"So you agree with the situation?" He was red at the ears too now, a sure sign that he was about to explode, and Hermione tried to quickly defuse the situation, especially in front of the always stern madam Pince.

"They are not dating, Ron."

"Huh?"

"I said they are not..."

"I heard that. How do you know? They are all lovey-dovey all the time."

"Ron, you have to open your eyes all the time, not only when you don't like a situation."

“Meaning?” he was squinting at her, now. ‘How predictable’ she thinks. But introspection about her knowledge of Ron’s mind could wait; there was a more pressing matter at hand, namely Ron himself.

“Did you notice times where they are crying together? We could not push them to speak then, and I gather from a little eavesdropping,” she blushed “that they are speaking about the Chamber and what happened.”

“I know! I was down there, remember?”

“Yes, Ron. But Harry fought a sixty feet long bloody snake! And Ginny was possessed by the spirit of the previous Dark Lord. How do you relate to that?”

A pregnant pause ensues, which Hermione delivered.

“I don’t. So I don’t intrude when they are like that. And if they are ‘love-dovey’, as you said, it’s a feedback of their sad memories. A relief, if you want.”

Ron seemed to understand. ‘At least, he seems to think about it’ Hermione reflected.

“Okay, Mione. I was wrong, I suppose. I still don’t like that it appears as if they were dating, sometimes. She’s too young for that. I also wouldn’t want to cut Harry off me because of her.”

“I agree, we are a little young for ‘dating’, but how long are you going to think that way? Until she’s of age? She’s living her own life, Ron. And, knowing her, I bet she won’t be ordered around, especially from now on.”

“I just wish we had a peaceful school, without trouble.”

“We perhaps wouldn’t be friends then...” Hermione reflected aloud, “remember that troll in first year? And the chess game that followed? I thought I lost you...” she stopped, shivering, and Ron hugged her awkwardly.

“Harry and Ginny shared this year, but we shared other experience also, Mione,” he muttered. “As long as we remember them, we’ll never be apart.”

Her head shot up. “Since when are you so wise, mister Weasley?” she joked through her sadness.

“Since I met you.” he answered, and they spent the better part of the next pregnant pause looking into each other’s eyes. Still Hogwarts, in the Great Hall, that evening...

The Leaving Feast was sumptuous. It always was, but, concluding the troubled year where the school almost closed, it is particularly welcomed. Albus Dumbledore rose from his chair, and started his concluding speech in the light of the floating candles.

“Year after year, I see students pass through this school, and I wanted to hold a toast to the special students who, through the years, helped the staff to allow the school to stay on the ground.” He raised his cup, and turned towards Hagrid, who blushed, then to Harry and his friends. “To heroes and friends.” The whole hall repeated the toast, and everyone drank. That’s when the most unusual sight graced the eyes of every student. All the teachers were transformed into animals, though keeping their human head, Dumbledore included. Hagrid was transformed into a black grizzly. Professor Trelawney, the glassy-eyed divination teacher, took the form of an owl. Professor McGonagall was a dignified panther. Professor Flitwick, charms teacher and Head of the Ravenclaw House, was morphed into a mouse, even if nobody noticed due to his diminutive size. Professor Sprout, Herbology teacher and Head of Hufflepuff, transformed into a mole. And Severus Snape got the aspect of an oily black snake. Finally, Dumbledore himself got transfigured into a wrinkled turtle.

The Great Hall was speechless for a time, but after professor Trelawney’s indignant hooting, everyone collapsed, laughing. From the corner of his eyes, Harry noticed Fred and Georges Weasley patting each other’s back. ‘We’ll try to get those two next year’, he reflected, thinking about the discussions he had had with Ginny about pranks, ‘they should appreciate it.’.

After a few minutes of laughing, each professor turned back into himself or herself, and Dumbledore spoke again.

“Thank you to whoever did that. It’s always interesting to change one’s point of view, and making everyone laugh at the same time. I heard once that laughing heals every wound,” he continued, looking briefly towards Harry and Ginny “so I hope the perpetrators of today’s prank will continue their work good-naturedly over the summer.” that last part was sent towards the Weasley twins.

“Without further delay, let the feast begin and the year end!” With these last words, everyone launched themselves towards the food, Harry and Ron being the first to begin, and the last to finish. At the end of the meal, Ron won, but only by a little. Besides, Harry had been eating more properly and his place wasn’t littered with food remains. Harry also wasn’t paling due to an excess of ingested food, like Ron was, now.

After the feast, the students went calmly back to their dorms, anxious to pack for the morning ride to London. It was only in the late hours of the night that the castle returned to its silent normalcy. In Gryffindor’s second year dorm, though, a wand was still alight with a Lumos spell. Even in the last night of the school year, Harry was awake, reading. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to use anything magical, sadly including doing his homework, at the Dursleys’ and that his trunk would probably be locked away.

Suddenly, the drapes of the left side of his bed, opposite Ron’s and the others’ beds, opened and an invisible form settled on his bed.

“Good evening, Ginny.”

She removed the cloak’s hood, and looked into his eyes. Despite the numerous talks they had the previous week, she was still self-conscious about meeting Harry in his official bed for the first time. But she couldn’t let go the last opportunity to be alone with him before the summer holidays. Even without romance yet, their relationship was becoming more than friendly. Noticing the book, she asked. “Is this the one you told me about?”

“Yes. I’m almost finished. I just finished his explanations about house-elf magic, and right now it’s about magic capabilities of woodland creatures. It’s weird how everybody thinks of him as a warrior whereas he spent so much of his last years abstracting models for magical theory.”

“Did you manage the shape shifting? You told me you were training this at night.”

“Yes, look.” and he extended his hand, concentrated hard. After a few seconds, a yellow fur appeared on it. He then transformed it back into a human hand, before smiling lightly. “I can’t get the claws yet, though, but I feel the ability progressing each day.”

“Claws?”

“Yes. I don’t know why, but the first animal I think of is a lion. Perhaps it’s because of... our house’s emblem.” he said, indicating his surroundings with a nod of his head. He was thinking about his ancestor, but didn’t really feel ready to share that one huge secret with Ginny right now, even if he spoke freely about the shape-shifting theories. Still, both of them understood he was speaking about Godric Gryffindor’s coat-of-arms, where nobody could miss the standing lion. Ginny was thoughtful, though.

“What?” he asked, after a moment of silence.

“You know, Harry, not so long ago, we had to write essays for History of Magic, and the topic was the Hogwarts Founders. I found some information about Godric Gryffindor in a book Hermione lent me. You know what his family name is, right?”

“Yes. Gryffindor.”

“Well, it appears that it wasn’t his name at first.” She was nervous, so Harry took her hand to soothe her. Smiling back, she continued. “His previous family name was an old Gaelic term for ‘of the lake’. But it’s

not what's important here. Do you know why he was called Gryffindor?"

Harry was really intrigued now. "Go ahead, I'm dying of curiosity."

"He was rumoured to have an animagus form of a golden griffin. You know? As in 'Griffin d'or' – of gold, in French. But it has never been confirmed. Besides, griffins and especially golden griffins are rare magical beasts, and no known animagus has been registered with a magical form. You know what a golden griffin looks like, Harry?"

He shook his head, but his mind was tugging at details he had forgotten, a long time ago.

"A winged lion."

At this, Harry stayed aghast for a long time, while Ginny held his hand, looking expectantly at him.

"A winged lion." he repeated, dumbfounded.

"Yes. And if you look at the early versions of his crest that are in the books, you'd see the folded wings."

A pause. Then he muttered "Well... that certainly explains a lot of things."

Another silence.

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Will you be okay, this summer?" after all, he did tell her he didn't want to go back there.

He sighed. "Dumbledore almost forces me to stay there. I can't very well refuse. He knows everything... I should be alright."

"You could go with us." she countered, blushing.

“You proposed that to me already, and you told me that your parents would agree. So I proposed the idea to Dumbledore, and, besides the annoying light in his eyes going brighter, he didn’t change his directions. I’m still going back to that pitiful place.”

He thought about that for a second, and then looked up to her, with a wide smile. “You know, I’m not to use my stuff this summer, the Dursley are really allergic to magic. I even made all my potion homework in advance.”

“Wow. Hermione would be so proud.” they laughed quietly.

“What I wanted to say is that you could take my invisibility cloak with you. After all, you are most proficient with it, by now.” She blushed, again, while giggling. He continued “And that way, you can play some pranks on your brothers.”

Her eyes lit up, and they began to discuss pranks and summer plans. Some time later, a tired and invisible Ginny couldn’t be seen leaving Harry’s bed and dorm, and heading towards her own.

Going back to the book, Harry remarked that only a-dozen-or-so pages remained, and decided to finish the book that night. Most of the remaining pages described how some weird creatures do their magic, including faeries and dragons. That research was done partly because, when he had successfully transformed into a magical creature, Godric had felt he didn’t have the corresponding magical powers, and he had felt that these powers weren’t linked to the physical form, but the inner core. He could still use the physical powers of the creatures, like the golden griffin flight, for instance. Harry felt somewhat smug that his ancestor, while not widely known for his research, was brave enough to fetch ancient dragons for that goal. After that part, another prank was described, as well as a spell enabling you to list ancestors using some blood samples. The very last page appeared only like a random enumeration of names, starting with Godric Gryffindor. Thinking that it was a credits page, Harry scanned it without paying real attention until he stumbled upon the very last name. And he got the surprise of his life. The last name was his own!

His own.

Harry James Potter.

And just above it, there was his mother's.

Lily Evans.

He scanned the list, but there was no other name he knew of.

What could it mean?

He read the short paragraph scribbled on the back cover, and started to understand.

To my dear descendant (again)

I didn't explain it at the start, but you should have now the knowledge to understand most of my research about blood. This book is charmed to recognize your blood, and if you drop a little of it on the book, it should display your genealogy line from me. In my office in Hogwarts, I deposited some blood of mine too, and of my three friends and co-founders, so that you can do some research of your own about it. I also included blood samples from the eight supposedly elemental children. Don't worry about their conservation; I did cast a preservation spell, doubled with a permanency charm.

Take care of you, my flesh and blood, and many cheers from the past.

G.G.

Harry was crying, now. No more than a week before, he hadn't known much about his family. Now, he knew his entire lineage from his illustrious ancestor down to him. However, he always thought his mother was muggle-born, and his aunt for sure hasn't an ounce of magic, so he wondered about his family. Anyways, him being Gryffindor's blood, that was the sort of fact which would make Draco jealous, he reflected with a small smile, before preparing to sleep for whatever remained of the night.

In a shoddy part of northern London...

The crack team of Aurors, sent to eliminate the vampire vermin, was waiting. They had encountered several problems. Firstly, there were obviously not two troublemakers, but three. Secondly, they were cut from their intelligence, as Tonks had tripped at some point, thus damaging the team's Comtact receiver. She had been carrying it because the others were more intent on going to battle and couldn't risk damaging it, and now, it was useless. Thirdly, they had entered the building when what they thought being the only two vampires left it, thinking that no one was there, and had stumbled on the third one. Now, one vampire was no match for the team, but the fight had caused much noise, and they were certain that the other two heard it and were heading back.

The room was obviously lived in by three vampires, and more coffins were one the side, waiting for the immigrants. What disturbed them more was the lavishly decorated dais under one of the vampires' "bed". It couldn't be worse if one of the vampires was the elder they had been told about, and judging by the state of the room, this one was ancient and powerful. Kingsley had told them that no one knew his face or identity, because the beast kept changing them, seemingly at random.

They were positioned in the vampires' living quarters, around the door. Melinda was full centre, katana at the ready. She had the agility to escape curses, and was most proficient with her weapon of choice. John and Stuart were at an angle towards the entrance, wands drawn. Tonks was beside Melinda, trying her best to imitate the dead vampire's facial features, but not succeeding completely; cross-gender metamorphmagus transformation had never been her forte. And they had hidden the remains of the slain vampire. Now they only had to wait for the incoming disaster.

The door opened, but the curses flew through the air, not encountering anything. It took them a precious few seconds to understand that one of the vampires, probably the elder, had used magic to open the door. During that time, a blurry shape pounced

through the open doorway into the room and his knife properly gutted John.

“What a shame,” was John’s last conscious remark “he just ruined my suit.”

The blurry shape then lunged towards Melinda, but, glimpsing Tonks in her best effort to imitate his fallen comrade, couldn’t help but stop suddenly. It never helps to stop wondering in mid-fight. The easy prey was decapitated on the spot by the oriental sabre.

“That wasn’t...” started Melinda.

“Yeah. Wasn’t me.”

The sing-song voice coming from the dark entryway seemed to come from a boy’s throat, but appearances can be deceiving, and the voice conveyed centuries of experience in death. The smallish frame of the elder, with blonde hair, crimson eyes, and clad in black, appeared in the door frame, before continuing darkly. “You just killed two of my lieutenants. You’ll suffer before begging for death!”

And pandemonium ensued. Tonks and Stuart threw curse after curse towards the elder, and Melinda attacked with the katana, for all she was worth. The elder, though, didn’t seem to have problems deflecting curses and blade. Conjuring a sword from mid-air, he even went into a mock sparring contest with her, his wand in his off-hand lazily shielding himself from the curses.

One innovation the Aurors of the British Ministry had learned, though, and which was not quite well-known in the outside world, was the ability to channel several persons’ magic into a much more powerful spell than any of the participants may achieve. That’s why the elder’s shield suddenly collapsed while he was pointlessly swinging his blade left and right. He even got on his knees from the effort and Melinda slashed at his sword arm. But, far from being dead, he panted, raising his sword to parry Melinda’s next lunge, and pointed his wand towards her.

“You’re not playing nice. I won’t either.” and he uttered a curse that neither of the Aurors there knew about. After all, innovation was running everywhere in the world. The curse was aimed, and landed, on Melinda’s chest and, not having a magical shield in place, she took the brunt of it, staggering backwards. Her eyes went wide, and she dropped her sabre which clattered on the ground, before falling on her knees while holding herself.

The elder smirked, while standing up again. “Efficient one, I admit. I love acid, it causes so much pain before allowing you to die. You have thirty sec...”

The elder couldn’t finish his sentence, as two angry Aurors started casting curse after curse towards his back. Without his shield, and having his good arm bleeding, he could only dodge them, but some were really hitting home, and he decided to flee towards the exit, pushing furniture around in doing so. Tonks inadvertently got herself in the way of a falling statue, and was knocked down and buried under a pile of rubble. Looking grimly around, Stuart promised himself to avenge his fallen comrades. He activated and dropped his emergency signal for the rescue team, and started pursuing the vampire in the streets while the track was still hot.

To be continued in next chapter: Wandering...

What is it with those youngsters?  
Why are these fighting gangsters?  
If you really want to know,  
Go review, guys, you know how.

## Chapter 5 – Wandering

The departing morning of Hogwarts' summer holiday should be a capitalized sentence. Some of the most dallying students didn't even start to pack, thinking about doing it in the morning, and playing games instead. The problem was that these students often wake late too, and generally weren't sufficiently organized to pack in a heartbeat. In Ron's case, add this to the fact that he wasn't efficient when hungry, and you could understand the loud voice emerging from his dorm. And it wasn't his own.

"Honestly, Ron!" Hermione was yelling at a shameful Ron, who was trying to close his trunk's lid, after an hour of frantic picking and storing. "How could you postpone packing this late! Everybody else is ready, and they even are eating right now." which wasn't quite true, because Harry and Ginny just arrived back from the breakfast a short time ago, and were now looking at the pair with a smirk. Still, the words made Ron react, and his stomach emitted a loud groan.

He cursed, and jumped on his trunk with both feet. That sure closed the offending luggage, but it also drew a big crack on it, too. And, judging by the sound of it, some more items might have broken inside. Ron paled and his eyes went wide at this, and he muttered "Mom is so gonna kill me."

But he quickly recovered at the notion of breakfast, and he threw himself through the doors, obviously on a quest to refill his stomach. Only the cutting remark from Ginny held him back. "Breakfast has been finished for 5 minutes before we got up here, Ron. No need to rush, there's no more food."

Nothing could have been more distressful for Ron than to miss a meal as important as breakfast. Well, perhaps except the end of the world. But the laughter in Ginny's voice, and the mischief present in the six eyes watching him, told him that something was amiss. Harry turned to Hermione, and seeming reluctant, gave her a galleon. Ron's eyes went wide again, then narrowed. "What are you all up to?"

"Well, you see..." began Hermione.

“We were sure you’d be late...” continued Harry after her friend’s pause.

“So those two placed a bet this morning, when you were still asleep...” Ginny explained.

“About when you’d finish your packing.” Hermione carried on.

“Pity, I thought you’d be able to reach breakfast, mate.” Harry finished, and the three of them started to laugh while descending the stairs towards the Entrance Hall and the doors to the grounds.

After a short while, Hermione started again “Seriously, Ron, you could have played less yesterday, you’d have had the time to take a proper breakfast now.”

Wanting to defend himself, Ron answered “But Harry played, too! Mate, I don’t know how you or Dean managed...”

“Simple, Ron. Dean played before his packing, and I took his place after mine. I even had time to put some protection spells on the trunk, in case my nosy relatives want to have a look. Sorry to have kept you up to play though. To excuse myself, I give you this.” and he took a Hogwarts-crested napkin from his pocket, and opened it tantalizingly in front of Ron. In it, a sandwich made of buttered toasts with bacon tugged at the redhead’s stomach. Ron’s eyes went wide again, and he started to drool.

“Urgh! Anyways, don’t listen to him, Ron. The food wasn’t his idea.” Ginny continued, taking another full napkin from her pocket too, and showing Hermione with her other hand.

“Hermione?” Ron looked at her questioningly, while stealing glances over the sandwiches.

“What? I did bet you wouldn’t be there! I knew for a fact that you wouldn’t be able to be there on time! To back my bet, I asked those troublemakers to bring you food, as I know I haven’t enough pockets

to fill with sandwiches to satisfy your otherworldly appetite!” Hermione retorted, but her smile nullified the possible sting of her words. Taking in her appearance, a little large for her frame with bumps at the usual places for pockets, Ron realized that, while annoyed at him for being late, Hermione cared enough to bring him a whole meal in her pockets. And, as the old maxim said ‘win the man through his stomach’, Ron was won to Hermione for sure.

The morning sun welcomed the quartet as they passed through the huge gates to the crowded zone there. The house-elves had spent a large part of the morning collecting students’ trunks and depositing them near the carriages, Ron’s arriving last.

Seeing the group emerging from the entrance, Neville Longbottom, another second year Gryffindor, joined them.

“Hi” he started timidly.

“Hi there, Neville.” They knew the boy from the previous year, when he had gathered all his courage to stand in their way.

“You mind if I get there with you? The other carriages are full already.”

“No problem, Nev.”

It was without second thoughts that they included the shy boy in their group. Harry, seeing the long queue for the carriages, took his owl out of her cage.

“Hiya, girl.” Hedwig answered by hooting softly.

“I know that you don’t like the trip in your little cage. You want to stretch your wings and go forward? I’ll arrive at Privet Drive for lunch.” The snowy owl nudged his ear, as if to thank him, hooted again, and took flight. ‘Owls are really smart creatures,’ Harry reflected, ‘it’s like speaking to a mute friend. But I wonder...’

“Hermione?” Harry wanted to continue his thoughts aloud, using his genius friend for information.

“Yes?”

“Do you know how owls can get every people’s location in the world?”

Hermione thought back for a moment, before answering. “It’s not clear, but I read somewhere that they can connect to people’s perceived identity. The text was half-burnt, though.”

“Huh?” was Ron’s only answer.

“Care to elaborate for those of us who aren’t as articulate as you?” continued Harry, smirking towards his dorm mate.

“I mean... you know you’re Harry Potter, right?”

“Well... obviously!”

“So, this is your ‘perceived identity’. As soon as you consider yourself to be Harry Potter, owls will find you. That’s also why people who change names, like a married woman for instance, can be found using both names, because they consider themselves equally responding to both names.”

“Errm... Hermione?” Neville started.

“Yes, Neville?”

“In case of... err... amnesia, what... ahem... what happen? I mean, you know, the owls and stuff... err...” Neville was stuttering now, lost in his own babbling.

“If we consider the theory true, people suffering from amnesia can’t be reached by owls. Why the question?”

Startled, Neville looked up to her, his eyes shining, then blushed, and looked towards the forest, mumbling “Nothing, just asking.”

After a long wait, they all found themselves in a departing carriage, surprisingly rejoined with Luna Lovegood, the airy Ravenclaw that welcomed Harry at breakfast after his week-long stay in the hospital wing. During the short trip to the train station, where the Hogwarts Express was waiting, Harry and Ron talked about Quidditch, even if Ron was more into eating his sandwiches. Question of priorities. Ginny held Harry’s hand while she and Hermione looked at each other with amused smiles on their faces. Neville checked on his toad, and Luna stared at the sky with a dreamy expression.

Once on the station, after the unloading of trunks from the carriages and their loading into the train, the group of six students found themselves in the same compartment.

Ron, finally finishing the last crumbs of his last sandwich, spoke up again “Thanks for the breakfast, Hermione; it was the sweetest thing you could do to me.”

Hermione blushed and muttered something.

Harry chuckled “I think she said ‘anytime, dearest’, Ron.”

Hermione, though, didn’t look pleased at all. “How could you say that, Harry?”

Ginny hid a smile behind her hand, and answered “You mean you didn’t say ‘get lost, you insufferable prat’, like you always do?”

Hermione whirled towards Ginny and loudly answered “No! Not at all! I just said that I could do sweeter th...” seeing the expectant and smiling faces of Harry and Ginny, and Ron’s shocked one, she realized that she had been had, and, blushing furiously, closed her mouth with a audible clomp. Pranks could be done without magic, too.

After a long while, the students mutely reflecting on the past, Ron broke the silence once again. Remembering the previous day, he exclaimed “How did you do it yesterday, Harry?”

“Did what?”

“Eat that much at the Feast. Properly. And without being as ill as I was just afterwards.”

“I don’t know about the ‘properly’ part, you will have to ask your mum.” at that, Ron snorted and the others giggled. “But for the rest, I guess that, as I said, I had reserves to fill. But either they were completely depleted, or I’m now a black hole concerning food. I hope not, though...” he appeared to have something else to say after this, but fell in a silent frown. Ginny, understanding about the underfeeding he had suffered while at the Dursleys, calmed him by squeezing his hand.

“What’s a black hole?” Ron asked, but judging from their faces, the other students without Muggle background were interested as well. That is, everyone except Hermione and Harry. Well, Luna, still looking through the window, didn’t seem to be interested in the discussion at all. But you never knew with her. Despite her apparent lack of interest, she managed to insert her airy comment into it before Hermione could answer Ron’s question.

“It’s a rupture in the space-time continuum, Ron.” She answered, then turned towards the other students, whose faces indicated their surprise at the explanation, either because it was true, which was surprising coming from Luna, or because they didn’t understand it. “What?” she continued “It’s a well-known fact that they can be used for time travel. My father found a time-traveller while hunting crumpled-horned snorksacks. Dad went to a pub where a contact was, and that other guy had very interesting stories to tell over his numerous beers.” After a pause, during which Hermione’s surprised face turned into a snort, she stood, adding “I’m going to the loo. Later.”

She crossed the compartment, opened the door, and went through it, letting it open. Her move was not missed by Neville, who just kept looking with glazed eyes through the empty doorway. Neville’s toad,

noticing the slackness of his owner's hands, jumped towards the corridor.

"Trevor!" Neville snapped awake and got up, barely managing to cross the other students tangled legs and trunks before starting to search for his toad. Again.

Once Neville was out of the compartment, Harry decided to tell the other three about something. He quickly closed the door and turned to his friends with an intense expression.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked, with a worried expression, elbowing Ron in the ribs. Blushing, Ron snapped out of the trance he had entered when Luna answered his question, five minutes before.

Ginny's face was unreadable, and Ron, after staring at Hermione, asked. "Yeah, mate, what?"

"I read a book."

A pause.

"Wow, Harry, I didn't know you could read, congratulations." Ron's voice was chirpy, and the laughter was near, but Harry's serious expression contained it. Hermione shot a discrete look towards Ginny, sensing a tough subject. Seeing the smirk caused by her brother's remark, she looked her squarely in the eyes, wondering.

"Okay, then. What about it?" Hermione asked.

"It's difficult to explain. See, Hermione, Ron, I wasn't unconscious because of the basilisk bite."

A pause.

"What?" both voices were worried.

“Yes,” he continued, having their full attention now “After the whole Chamber affair, I stumbled upon Lucius Malfoy and Dobby, you know, their house-elf?” They nodded.

“Well, as Dobby was being mistreated, I planned to free him so I put a sock of mine in the diary, and went to give it back to Malfoy, who was still at Hogwarts for a hearing, hoping that he gives it to Dobby. But he and Dobby were going, and I was kind of portkeyed with them to Malfoy’s place.”

“WHAT?” this time, both his friends were clearly upset, but he didn’t let them start to rant.

“Before you get angry, hear me out. I didn’t exactly plan it that way, remember? Well, as I was landing there, I discovered that travelling through house-elf magic is really painful for the wizard involved. But I knew he wouldn’t give me a pause, so I tried the plan immediately. I gave the diary back to him, and, as planned, he gave it to Dobby who then got freed. The problem is that the bastard was then enraged, and he tried his damndest to kill me. I got hurt really bad, and escaped to their library. There, I don’t know why, but he casts exploding curses everywhere, and the shelves fall everywhere. I got buried under countless tomes and without Dobby bringing me back to the hospital wing, I’d have died. I still had to recover for the whole week, and Dumbledore, while knowing the truth, hid it so that the bastard’s family and friends would not go after me. At least not immediately. I don’t even know if he’s dead! The only two persons knowing that I wasn’t recovering from the fight with the basilisk are Ginny... and you, Ron.”

Startled, Ron seemed to think, and eventually looked back to Harry with a sad expression. “Mate, I’m sorry, really. I was worried with Ginny. We all were, and I assumed you had a backlash. I mean, Dumbledore said so, and it’s not my place to contradict him. Well...”

Harry tried to ease the situation by answering “You’re right. I should do that job. I like contradicting people.” Even if nobody laughed outright, smiles found their ways towards the friends’ faces.

“Back to the point.” Harry continued “While I was in that library, bleeding everywhere, I noticed a book glowing red and gold, and I remember thinking ‘Weird, Gryffindor colours at Malfoys’ house’ and I got hold of it just before Dobby brought me back.”

Being her usual self, questing for knowledge, Hermione interrupted. “Did you read it? What does it say? Where is it? Can I see it?”

Harry shut her up by looking sharply at her, and then he answered. “Yes. Interesting stuff. In my trunk. No.”

Hermione and Ron looked at him wide-eyed before remembering Hermione’s questions. Ginny, sitting next to Harry, watched the whole exchange amusedly.

Harry chuckled lightly at the understatement he was about to make. He doubted that even Dumbledore knew about the research he had found in the book. And he planned for it to stay that way, at least until the end of summer vacation, in case he would need an extra leverage for staying out of the Dursleys’ next year.

“That book was written by an ancestor of mine, and it explains all his research in magic. And I think that it’s still pioneering today, as I didn’t read anything remotely similar from the library. But Hermione can perhaps tell us more.” He turned towards his bushy-haired friend. “Is there a common magical theory behind animagus and metamorphmagus transformations?”

This pushed Hermione into her knowledge-reporting mode, and everyone could see that she was very organized, because a mere five seconds later, she answered. “Nothing that I know, but I did not get into the Restricted Section. Perhaps it exists but is safely guarded. We should ask professor McGonagall for that. Harry, can you show me the book, please? If such information is that important, I want to be part of it.”

Thoughtful for a moment in front of an agitated Hermione, Harry answered “Sorry, Mione, I actually can’t. That ancestor made it so that only his descendants could read it. For you, it would look like an

ordinary copy of... an ordinary book. But I plan to tell you everything about it, over the summer.” He had no intention of divulging the pranks, though, but Hermione was right. If only one witch her age was entitled to essential knowledge, it was her. And, true to her reputation, she looked piercingly at Harry, and asked “Who is it?”

“Who what, Hermione?”

“Your ancestor?”

“I won’t say, Hermione. It’s really big stuff, and as it is, I still feel not worthy of his name.”

“I’ve been prying him for a week.” Ginny interrupted, “He wouldn’t tell, even under torture.”

Ron shot an enquiring look at his sister. “What torture, what do you mean? And you knew about all this for a week?”

Without a word, and without even releasing Harry’s hand, Ginny bent towards Ron, and touched him precisely on the top of his hip, making him jump a foot into the air with a yelp. She then smiled proudly “Harry is very ticklish too, but he wouldn’t tell anyway. He’s more stubborn than ticklish.” She finished with a pout.

Ron looked ready to explode, but Hermione contained him by whispering in his ear something he had already heard earlier this week. Harry shot them a curious glance and said aloud to Ginny, but towards the other couple “Ginny dear, it seems we are not the only ones sharing secrets here.” The little comment succeeded in making the three other students there to blush to their hair. Ron and Hermione because they were starting to know each other well, and liked each other very much; and Ginny because of his choice of words. ‘Dear’, indeed! She held his hand a little tighter, and everyone fell back into a comfortable silence.

After a minute or so, Hermione couldn’t stop charging again. “Is there?”

When it appeared that not everyone shared her train of thoughts, she expanded her question. "Is there a common ground to animagi and metamorphmagi?"

Harry sighed. He should have seen that coming. He looked up to check that the solid compartment door was closed, and looked back to her. Then Hermione saw a strange event occurring: Harry's hair gradually went from his natural black to a more dark red shade, and back. Harry then raised his hand, and everybody could see it transforming into a golden paw, with claws, and back again. He then simply answered "Yes" before sitting back, sweating. He had tried the first part of the book almost immediately, but the actual physical transformation was still difficult and painful. However, the meditation techniques provided by his so-many-great-grandfather were quickly usable.

He closed his eyes, and his breathing evened almost immediately. 'I should really tell all of it to them all,' he reflected, 'it's damn useful.' The shape-shifting would even allow him to alter his muscle mass and, to a lesser degree, his bones. Theoretically, it could also allow him to heal himself from physical wounds. The book even hinted towards the usefulness of shape-shifting in the field of unarmed combat. Of course, when one could produce claws at will, it wasn't really 'unarmed' anymore, rather 'body weaponry'. Still, to save one's hide, anything was game.

After a moment of wondering, Hermione frowned, her rule-abiding side showing. "Harry! Don't do that again! You are going to be expelled if you do magic during the summer!"

"I know, Mione, but the Ministry only detects wand magic." Harry had taken on himself to get information about this because of Dobby's antics the previous summer. Still a little feeble from the transformation, he closed his eyes.

Ginny, though, was grinning widely. "You managed the claws! You did!" she was chirping.

Hearing this, Ron glared at them again, and asked Harry, a little too rudely "How many more secrets do you share with my baby sister, Harry?"

"We don't..." Harry began.

"I'm not..." Ginny started.

But neither could continue because the door opened, with Neville and Luna entering the compartment again. What shocked the four sitting students was that the usually calm and collected Neville smiled like a madman, and he had lipstick on the cheek, the colour of Luna's. Apart from this, Trevor was held by Luna, who was speaking to it as if it was an understanding person. Ron looked at the pair, bewildered, and the other three friends tried to hide their smiles under their hands. Harry, sensing that problems would arise if Neville was to show himself in public with the mark still on the cheek, got the other boy's attention, and started "Nev, you have lipstick..."

And that was it. Harry, Ginny, and Hermione couldn't contain their laughter anymore, and Ron smirked. While Neville first appeared stunned then blushed profusely, he started to smile also at the humour of the situation. Neville then wiped his cheek carefully with a clean handkerchief that he folded neatly afterwards, before storing it away in his pockets. After the laughter died down a little, Luna, still holding and watching Trevor as if it was a cursed prince, remarked "whenever you want more, help yourself." Neville, who had managed to regain a proper composure, blushed again. Laughter rose again in the fast-moving compartment of the train speeding through the countryside to deliver students to their parents and guardians. Some time later...

Harry was upset. Really upset. He hadn't wanted to go 'home' to Privet Drive, but Dumbledore had insisted, and he didn't dare contradicting him, despite what he said to Ron on the train. That was just a little teenager bravado. But he wasn't home yet.

Everyone had had their family waiting; even Neville had his imposing grandmother. Some rich purebloods got butlers waiting; some kids of powerful magical families or ministry employees got portkeys. But after the hugs and handshakes delivered around the platform, all the Express passengers were gone. All in all, the platform was deserted in less than fifteen minutes. And, after being bear-hugged by Hermione, shaking hands with Ron, and hugging and kissing Ginny on the cheek in front of her surprised mother, causing Ginny to blush, Harry was alone.

After searching for his relatives around the station, Harry sat on the street outside the station, waiting for his uncle to appear. After two hours in this position, the day was advancing into afternoon, and heavy clouds began to cover the city, while Harry's thoughts started to wander in all directions.

‘What if they had an accident?’

‘I hope it doesn't rain soon, I don't like these clouds.’

‘I could use a chocolate frog right now.’

‘Could I grow wings?’

‘Darn, I'm sure they forgot me on purpose.’

Harry was not only alone, but he also didn't have any mean of communication to his guardians, or anyone in the magical world. Earlier, he had sent Hedwig directly to Little Whinging, and he didn't know the telephone number of his relatives. As he never had to call them, and the wizarding world not needing the annoying devices, he never memorized it. And he couldn't even look through the phone directories! He knew that his aunt, some years earlier, caught in a home security frenzy, had subscribed to a service hiding one's phone number from the public files. He found some Grangers in the heavy books, though, but, getting his money out of his pocket, met a slight problem. In no way his Knuts, Sickles, and Galleons could work with the phone booth. He had to change them into pounds! And there was only one place he knew where he could do it: Gringotts. Besides,

once at the wizarding bank, he could also withdraw money for a commuter train ticket. Looking around to see if anybody was watching him, he found himself utterly alone in the street darkened by the rumbling clouds, and heavy rain drops started to fall languidly. Sighing, he ripped the directory page with all the Grangers' numbers, in case of need later, and the local area map. He made a short incursion into the station again, to get a look at the board showing the timetables for the commuter trains to Surrey. The last train was going to leave at 6:30pm and the time now was 1:30pm, so he had little time for his round-trip expedition to Diagon Alley and Gringotts. Pushing the heavy trolley, with his school trunk and empty owl cage on it, in the empty and wet streets, he followed the map to a point where he knew he could see the Leaky Cauldron. Upon arriving there, 2pm could be heard ringing on public clocks, and Harry was soaking wet. Opening the door and going through, Harry found Tom, the bartender.

"Sorry, sir." he said, pointing with his hand towards the path from the door to the bar, wet from Harry's outside trekking.

"Not a problem, lad, come on in, come in. What can I do for you?"

"Can you keep my stuff while I go to Gringotts? I have to exchange muggle money for a commuter train." Thirty years of servicing all sort of customers, especially eccentric wizards, had led Tom to provide any kind of service on the spot, so he readily accepted and directed the trolley towards the back while Harry went to Diagon Alley's entry.

Remembering the proper combination, he tapped the bricks, and was astounded when the archway opened to a sunny day, not like the one he was coming from. Shaking his head, he reflected that wizards could do that, and that he didn't have leisure time to dawdle.

The wizarding bank, held by the Goblins for centuries, hadn't changed at all since Harry's previous visit. Thankfully, the attendance was rather low, and, after only 15 minutes of queuing, he found himself in the roller coaster cart, riding down towards his vault. Arriving there, he spent some time to get his bearings straight, before using his key to enter the vault. There was slightly less money in it

since the first time he saw it, and he absentmindedly remarked that it must have been the two years' worth of Hogwarts fees. Because of the lowered money level, though, he noticed something he hadn't seen previously. Behind the money piles, there was a framed painting. What did a painting have to do inside a bank vault?

Moving around his piles of Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts, he approached the frame. And once there, able to have a good look at it, he got another shock. On the painting, there were people. People he knew without knowing. People he was dying to know better, but who had died before him knowing. His parents.

For some time, he looked at them with tears running on his cheeks. They looked like real. With his mixed education, he knew that they looked too real to be a muggle painting, yet they were not moving like wizardry portraits do. Something was missing. He reflected on it for a time, before remembering his tight schedule. Squatting to get hold of some galleons, he also noticed that, on the ground in front of the painting, was a rather non-descript wooden box, half the size of his school trunk. Still moved by his parents' sudden appearance, he cautiously opened the box, and found a clutter of items, mostly loose papers, and small vials of unknown liquids. Glancing at his watch he decided that he had very little time for exploration, and he removed only the first items from the box. The first one he found was a velvety ring box, containing a ring and a leaflet. The ring looked like a signet ring, with the embossed letters G/S on it, and there was something written on its inside but Harry couldn't make heads or tails from it. The accompanying leaflet explained that the ring was made for Ginevra Shaun, and it was invisible to Muggles. A hand-written line at the bottom merely stated "To mum, with love – James."

Harry's head was spinning again. In less than a fortnight, he had come across a thousand years' worth of his mother's family names, and now he was discovering his father's. A small part of his mind was smirking about the sameness of first names between his grandmother and his friend Ginny. Idly, he put the ring on, bracing himself for a magical effect and almost disappointed of not feeling any. Anyway, the ring being invisible to Muggles, he felt no qualm to keep it when at Privet Drive.

Digging in the box again, he found a crispy envelope with, written on it, the following words:

In case anything happen to us. – J&L

Opening it quickly, awaiting a letter of sorts to him, he found himself annoyed of finding only a formal letter, looking like a legal document.

To whoever in charge of magical law enforcement when this missive is released, we, James and Lily Potter, hereby state that we took refuge in our cottage located in Godric's Hollow, under the Fidelius charm cast by Albus Dumbledore, using Peter Pettigrew as secret keeper. This letter is written under a wizard's oath spell, and its content can not and will not be changed whatever the case. It can't be destructed and tampered with.

Not understanding the whole thing behind all this, Harry suddenly remembered that Remus Lupin, a friend of his parents, was coming to check on him this summer. So, he took the letter in his pocket so that to give it to him or Dumbledore later. With a last glance to his wristwatch, then a regretful one to the box, he closed the lid and, taking a handful of galleons, headed out of his vault.

Once upstairs, he went into the queue again, this time for the muggle exchange office. The queue was very short there, as only a few wizards needed that service. Once there, Harry dropped his galleons on the counter, and asked for the equivalent in pounds. He didn't think about the exchange rate while being in his vault, and was a little apprehensive about having to go downstairs once more. But the stack of notes the cashier silently pushes his way was high enough to get the train, and could even last for the entire summer. It was a good thing too, because he could eat more than the meagre portion his aunt usually served him. Thanking the impassive cashier, Harry hurried outside towards the Leaky Cauldron, when a dark shape, going out of the apothecary's at the same time, happened to cut his way. The impact was inevitable, and Harry fell back on the floor whereas the large frame of Severus Snape just stumbled.

“Watch your way, young... Oh, it’s you, Potter!” Snape didn’t seem pleased, but something was different about his onyx eyes. Still, he didn’t help when Harry got up, patting his sore posterior.

“What are you doing here? Hasn’t the Headmaster given you an order about your residence this summer?” Snape’s tone was harsh, but the eyes were still unfathomable.

“Errrm... My relatives didn’t show up at the station, and I’m going to take the train towards them. That’s why I had to get money.” Harry finished, indicating Gringotts behind him with his thumb.

Snape was silent for a moment, eyeing an uneasy Harry critically, then asked “You are not fleeing your relatives, are you?”

Still not comfortable under Snape’s scrutiny, especially about the fact that he wanted to flee them, Harry exclaimed “No! I would not disobey...”

“Good.” Snape interrupted and, looking at his watch, suddenly appeared pressed for time. “Be sure to be there this evening. And be sure to write your Headmaster about this and anything else of importance.”

Thinking of missives that could be sent to the Headmaster, Harry quickly reacted and, poking around his pockets, he extracted the letter from his parents about the secret keeper. “Can you give him that, Professor?”

Not answering, not even looking at Harry, Snape took the letter and stored it hastily in his pocket. He then left so quickly that Harry didn’t have time to thank him.

Looking at the back of his teacher, retreating towards the entrance of Knockturn Alley, Harry reflected for a second on his professor’s behaviour. Then, shaking himself out of his trance, he went back to the Leaky Cauldron to get his stuff back, before heading to the train station again, and to Little Whinging afterwards.  
Around London, at night...

The fat man got home late this night. He always got home later than his job released him to get a round in a random pub, but this time, it was different. He had been fired, for John's sake, and he felt compelled to drown this fact into the arms of a Famous Grouse. Not that he appreciated the good tastes or anything, he just asked the wary bartender his strongest drink. A few downed bottles and many hours later, he got out of the pub, and entered his car with difficulty. Any bobby there at that point would have arrested him, but luck was on his side at this particular moment, because he arrived home without hitting anything except a few stray trashcans. However, upon arriving in his driveway in the evening, he mistook the brake pedal with the accelerator, thus driving straight into his garage door, and slamming into its right wall also. Of course, this kind of action caused some noise, that could be only described as hellish. His wife was still up, worrying, but the neighbours were not. Because of the noise, though, some windows alighted themselves and curious faces showed themselves. As the driver got out of the car, which was halfway embedded in his own house, everybody could hear the loud and slurred cursing, even before seeing the purple face of Vernon Dursley.

To be continued in next chapter: Global Destruction...

That was plain old travelling,  
And explaining changeling.  
What'll happen when he gets there?  
To know that, review! So there...

## Chapter 6 – Global Destruction

The train had been late, and the last bus hadn't waited for the connecting commuters. Harry and three other persons were left, grumbling, in the train station of Little Whinging. The other commuters, having their cars parked nearby, already left. The three other persons were a man in a grey raincoat, which Harry would kill to possess right now, and a plump woman with a young girl. The girl stared innocently at Harry and his heavy luggage, just before showing her tongue to him. Then they left, hurrying under the downpour.

Harry was alone, again. And it was raining, again. He wanted to wait for the rain to ease down, but it didn't, and it even intensified. The clock on the wall of the station was nearing 9pm, and the only employee, yawning, told him to go outside, because the station was closing. Disgruntled, Harry obeyed after a long look at the area map. It wouldn't be good to be lost at this hour, now would it?

So, with his trunk in tow, and his owl's cage in his other hand, Harry started to trudge back to Privet Drive.

After one hour, Harry was sweating and heaving, but he was nearing the backyard entrance of number 4, Privet Drive, which was the straightest path one could find between his relative's place and the station. He was also exhausted and on the verge of catching a cold. Weren't he so tired from hauling his heavy and now damp trunk through half the town, he would have been worried by the voices coming from the house. His bad luck, though, pushed him through the kitchen's door, right into the playfield. When he opened the door, the voices stopped, and his plastered hair prevented him from noticing the faces of his relatives looming in the room. He just noticed the smell of grease and bacon burning. 'How weird, they are taking dinner this late...' he reflected. Only when the door closed after him did the voices start again.

"YOU!"

Not surprised at the tone, but rather by the vehemence of the addressing voice, Harry narrowed his eyes to look up through his half-fogged glasses and his plastered locks, to the plum-coloured

face of his uncle, and instantly knew he was in trouble. In very deep trouble.

“How dare you showing your freaky face here? We didn’t get you for a reason!” his aunt screeched, while his uncle was hyperventilating.

“You! You’re... freak... I... won’t... keep... parents... make... regret... being... born...”

That’s all his obviously inebriated uncle managed to utter, while taking a hesitant step towards him at each word. As soon as he was in range of the frightened Harry, the overly large frame of Vernon Dursley lunged itself towards him, and the punch wasn’t restrained at all. It could have downed a well-trained boxer. It could have split the heavy wooden table. On Harry’s wiry frame, the effect was devastating. Dropping the trunk and Hedwig’s cage, he was sent flying backwards from the hit, and hit the stove, before dropping in a heap against the closed door. Once there, in a state of semi-consciousness, he panted miserably. His uncle, though, wasn’t one to take pity of him, especially in his intoxicated state and, taking advantage of Harry’s position on the floor, landed a vicious kick in his nephew’s midsection, audibly cracking a rib or two in the process. Then he straightened back, looking suspicious.

“What’s... this?” he uttered, reaching for some paper he saw emerging from the boy’s pocket. When he extracted them, though, his eyes went wide, and he yelled. “Money! All this lodging... we did raise... for free... and you had... never paid! You little... cheater!” he then retreated towards the stove.

Knowing that his punishment wasn’t over yet, Harry looked up apprehensively, and started to whimper when he caught his uncle’s purpose.

Vernon Dursley had come back totally smashed one hour before, and his personal sobering method was to eat as much as he could, and as greasy as possible. Rather inefficient, in fact, but at least it would force him to stay at the table. Now, he was awkwardly holding the frying pan on top of Harry’s head, enjoying the deer-caught-in-

headlights look on his nephew's face. "It's your fault... Dudley was expelled... have been fired... All your fault! You'll rue... the day... you were born."

His breath cut, Harry can't really protect himself, apart from trying to scream, when Vernon emptied the content of the pan onto his head. As the Dursleys like their bacon greasy, the equivalent of a litre of burning oil fell on Harry's mop of hair, with scraps of sizzling bacon. If the first microseconds of contact felt good, because of his generally damp and cold state, it quickly turned into a pain so intense and overwhelming that he couldn't even scream, his whole being threatening to shut down. His face was smoking, devastated, and the scorching oil slipped inside his clothes, damaging some more skin there. If it wasn't such a frightening sight, you could have laughed at the random scraps of bacon littering the teen's head.

"I should... done that... long time ago!" bellowed the brute, before striking Harry with the pan. The already semi-conscious boy lost it completely and fell down on the floor, almost not breathing.

Awakened a long time ago from his dad's accident and ramblings, and understanding that his old man now found a substitute of sorts to his problems, Dudley finally showed his head through the kitchen door. In the time of one year, he had been expelled from Smeltings due to his shift of interest from academics to boxing. Well, as if he had the slightest inclination towards academics before. In any case, he so wanted to bring his style to perfection that he attacked everyone who displeased him. The rather permissive attitude of the staff, linked to the money his parents did put in, continued until he assaulted a teacher. Vernon Dursley had hollered against the staff, of course, but Dudley was too far gone for redeeming. Once back home, he had been enrolled in the local public school, where he had gone into his hobby even more than before, the living example of a bully. Furthering that streak, he had associated with dubious friends, and had been inserted into the local gangs, where his muscles were an asset. With difficulty, he had even learned to use guns and steal cars.

Once showing himself in the kitchen, though, seeing his father's appearance, he was close to lose every little nerve he ever had. The man was dishevelled, and his often brick-coloured face had now a

deep purple hue. His eyes were bulging outwards, his clothes were in disarray, and smelt of alcohol, as his breath did. Recovering, Dudley saw the crumpled form of his cousin near the door, just when Vernon Dursleys noticed the large form of his son.

“Come on... sonny! Let’s give... the freak... a last run-down.” the underlying tone was clear, and frightened Petunia Dursley. Sure, she had never liked her sister, nor her nephew. Sure, she had abhorred being forced to lodge him. Sure, she generally agreed with her husband on all the issues relative to ‘freaks’. But that was going too far. They were obviously going to kill him. And she couldn’t stop them. In Vernon’s state of mind, he would associate her to her nephew immediately. And their son has changed so much lately that she wasn’t sure of his reactions towards her anymore. So, she went to the living room not to see the slaughter. She was quite sure that, before killing the boy, their machismo would push each of them to outdo the other in torturing him. The exchange of voices between her husband and her son confirmed her darkest intuitions, and the odd sounds coming from the kitchen made her shiver. She started to cry, imagining the reaction of the old wizard she met such a long time ago.

“...I bet you I break his arm with my hand...”

“...what does a burning freak smell? Let’s try the stove...”

“...ouch, that stinks! Did you really have to put so much grease? He’s all burnt now...”

“...yeah, after KFC, here comes DFF: Dursley’s Fried Freak...”

“...here, here...”

“...what is a muscle, inside?” “I dunno, take that knife and let’s find out...”

“...do you think I can touch the heart with a fork? Ah, missed, bad luck...”

“...you know, I always thought that the tiger paw’s scars on the face were the worst done on the movies. I wonder if I can do better...”

“...that’s funny, we don’t see his stupid scar anymore.” “Yeah, too many cuts...”

“...he doesn’t react anyway, it removes all the fun.” “Try spraying some salt on the cuts.” “Doesn’t work...”

“...what does a breaking bone sounds like?” a crack “Aaah... I like this sound.” another crack.

“...hey! Watch your steps!” “Sorry, I slipped on the blood...”

It was a long time until both Dursley males turn back into the living room, a demented gleam in their eyes, and blood on their hands and clothes. They seemed calmer now, and talked amiably. The subject of their chat was not that pleasant, though.

“I wretched the car, but I think it could still run for a short while.”

“No need dad, I’ll ‘take’ Mr Slenger’s pick-up.”

A silence and two curious looks later, Dudley explained, to his mother’s worry and his father’s contentment. “I know how to ‘take’ a car, okay? Dad, make sure he’s wrapped in the carpet we talked about, I’ll park by the backyard.”

“Is he...?” Petunia started.

“No, the bastard... still lives.” answered her husband, still panting from the effort, before finishing with a hardness in his voice “But not for long... We are going to... dump him... somewhere safe. You, take care of his... ‘things’... and clean the place.”

Getting in the corridor, Vernon Dursley reached into the cupboard under the stairs, then went back in the kitchen holding Harry’s old linens and covers. He enveloped the body in these, and, noticing headlights flashing in the backyard, dragged it through the door. He

and his son picked up the dreadful package and dropped it rudely in the pick-up, before covering it up with some items already there. Then Dudley took the wheel and they sped out of Little Whinging.

Taking the highways, Dudley followed his father's directions, and they turned around London, making use of Mr Slenger's previously filled tank. Unknown to both his wife and his son, before living in the mid-level suburb of Little Whinging, Vernon Dursley had been a thug in a shoddy part of northern London, and he was directing his son towards that precise area. Like father, like son, could reflect Dudley if he knew, and if a whale could reflect. Besides, he was driving already. He had been taught to drive while learning how to steal a car. After all, if you couldn't drive the car you stole, there was little use. Luck was on the Dursleys' side, again, because nobody intercepted the pick-up with the underage driver, his still-smashed father, and their hideous freight.

Upon arriving, Vernon directed Dudley through the poorly lit streets, until they arrived to a large pile of rubble and waste. The stench was almost unbearable, but the two males, high on adrenaline, took their shipment and, together, went on top of the rubble, and dropped it there. Then they returned to the still-running car, patting each other's back as if coming back from a job well done.

At home, Petunia was a whirl of cleaning activities. With reason, she thought that taking whatever action she could think of would direct her thoughts away from the recent events. Even cleaning the ugly mess in the kitchen was having that soothing effect. She had dropped the trunk and bird cage in the cupboard and locked it, forgetting about it for now. Still, on the rare still seconds she had, like while waiting for the bucket to fill, she couldn't suppress a feeling of approaching doom. She had knowingly allowed her charge to be killed and, unknown to her, the related nullification of the blood protection was tearing at her soul.

The clocks in the house chimed midnight.  
Same time, somewhere else...

"My Lord! My Lord!"

The small and caped form of Peter Pettigrew entered the excuse for a throne room, visibly nervous. A portly human was sitting on a large armchair. Voldemort, still a roaming spirit, had taken another victim after Professor Quirrell, last year. Barty Crouch, Jr. was happy to serve his Lord, and had submitted entirely to his will. There was nobody to play the comedy to, and the spirit of the Dark Lord had taken over Crouch's whole body. That was Voldemort speaking directly through the mouth of the man.

"Peter! You wait before I command you to talk!"

"But my Lord, Potter's..." he couldn't finish, because the Lord in question spoke at the same time.

"Crucio!"

The man crumpled on the floor, screaming from the torture spell. Still, Voldemort had heard something of interest, and he released the spell quickly. But not before a dozen seconds had elapsed: even if few in numbers, his followers were to be obedient!

"Talk, Peter! And this has better be good news, or you'll taste more of this." he said in his usual high-pitched hiss, through Crouch's unnaturally constricted throat, while waving his wand in the air to accentuate the threat.

"My Lord, the shields protecting the summer house of Potter are down! And I know for a fact that he is inside! Potter is ours, my Lord!"

The excitement of his underling was infectious, and Voldemort, the current Dark Lord, smiled. However, due to his reduced state and the fact that Dumbledore troops were to show themselves there also, he wouldn't take the risk of being seen nor attacked there. "Peter, you are to round the current duty team, and you'll take charge of the situation. I don't think more than the four of you would be necessary to manage some muggles and to capture the elusive brat. Bring me Potter, alive! If anything happens, you'll be held responsible! Kill any opposition, but not in the open."

Peter Pettigrew was ecstatic. That was his first real mission after his Lord's return to the world. He apparated directly into the place where Crabbe, Goyle, and Avery were stationed, waiting for missions like this. In the previous year, Voldemort had first found his current puppet in the person of Barty Crouch Jr, and he had contacted his favourite rodent. Pettigrew had then, using the cover of his animagus form, contacted most of the remaining Death Eaters to rebuild Voldemort's forces. Severus Snape hadn't been contacted, though, as Voldemort wasn't sure of his allegiance anymore. After all, the Potion Master had been on Dumbledore's side two years before.

Upon arriving in the apartment, Peter Pettigrew yelled immediately, to the surprised faces of the three people present. "Hurry people! Our target is 4, Privet Drive! Apparate now!"

The Death Eaters had been the quickest to react, because Pettigrew was already near Privet Drive, in his rat form, when Petunia decided to let her husband kill her nephew, thus causing the blood protection wards to collapse. He had felt it immediately and had apparated to his lord. Another factor speeding their response time was that, some time ago, every loyal Death Eater follower had been updated with the reason behind their lord's first demise, and now they all knew the location to apparate to. In a concert of pops, they all left the premises.

The clock on the chimney's mantel beeped, like it did every half hour. The time was thirty minutes after midnight.  
Back at Privet Drive...

The man was unconscious and lying on a public bench in the opposite side of number 4, Privet Drive, holding an empty bottle of spirits. Too much drink, evidently. Guard duty, you say! Four pops were heard besides his bench, just as a pick-up was pulling over in the street. A man and a boy were seen getting out of it and heading towards the wretched entryway of number 4. The Death Eaters were quick on their feet, and followed their preys into the house. All this didn't wake the drunken man.

“What?” stuttered Vernon Dursley, as he was rudely pushed forward in his living room, where his wife was waiting, and his son already was. The entry door clicked closed behind him.

The approaching doom that Petunia Dursley had sensed had taken the form of four dark-robed, white-masked wizards. She screamed, just as three “Crucio!” resounded in the area, quickly followed by the screams emitted by Vernon Dursley and his son.

Under the curse, Vernon’s mind replayed the toughest bits of his life, and decided on the spot that the pain he was feeling right now surpassed everything he went through before. He screamed louder now, to the satisfaction of the Death Eaters. Peter Pettigrew knew a bit of the house, having spied on Harry’s friend Ron for a long time, as a pet rat. He had also decided, before calling for his three fellow Death Eaters, that he was to fetch the brat alone, and take all the credit of Potter’s abduction. He let his colleagues take pleasure of the muggles’ screams, and went out of the room and up the stairs, in search of the boy.

When he didn’t find Harry, he started to frown, remembering the shushed rumours about Potter being kept in the cupboard under the stairs. Throughout his visit, Peter couldn’t stop being annoyed by the lingering smell of cleaning products. He hated these products with a passion, and it was in a state of real annoyance that he opened the cupboard door, only to find Harry’s trunk, still damp from the trip.

Potter not found, Peter decided to plunder the trunk before killing the muggles. Unfortunately, Harry had put some protection spells on the trunk, so it didn’t open immediately. Furious, for not finding the boy, smelling the scent of cleanness, and having a mere trunk resisting his will, Peter hit the trunk repeatedly, only succeeding in banging its interior. There was some noise like glass breaking, and the lock finally latched open. Wary, he waited for a few seconds before opening the lid.

Flashback...

“ So, for this summer’s homework, you will have to brew the Pepperering potion and the Cicatrisation ointment. The recipes are in

this year's textbooks, and your potions, if successful, will be added to the hospital wing's stocks. They could even be used on yourself one day or another, so be careful to prepare them correctly."

Professor Snape paused, looking directly at Harry, before continuing his directions.

"Take care with the Pepperering potion ingredients as they are very volatile. The Essence of Pimento is also very flammable. On the contrary, most of the elements of the ointment are very stable, but you'll add the appropriate dose of Sulphur to make it react to the natural atmosphere. Be sure to never mix those liquids, as the results are unpredictable and can be very explosive, especially in the open air. Understood, Longbottom?"

Returning to the present...

Harry had done his Potion homework early. He had stowed it in his trunk. But he had never considered a mad Death Eater kicking his trunk around, so he hadn't taken extra precaution in wrapping his bottles. And that were rather large bottles. The result was akin to dropping a napalm bomb. As soon as the lid opened, the liquid fire engulfed the corridor, setting fire to everything. Poor Peter's face was directly in the way of the wave, and his head was literally fried on the spot, making him stumble backwards, dead even before hitting the floor.

The fire expanded, consuming everything. The potion ingredients left in the trunk exploded in a cascade of colours and the Death Eaters in the next room, seeing the fire and the display of ominous colours, apparated away. Their victims, though, were not that lucky. Just recovering from the pain of the Cruciatus, they couldn't get up and it was with open eyes that they saw their beloved living room burst into flames, the numerous photos of Dudley exploding under the heat, and their clothes, hair, and skin setting ablaze. They didn't have enough energy to scream, and the last conscious thought they had, strangely shared by the three of them, was that is definitely hadn't been a good idea to kill Harry Potter.

The clocks were burning, their hands briefly poised at one in the morning, before crumbling into ashes.  
At the same time, somewhere else...

Stuart Lengley was fed up, his half-blood stamina be damned. It has been the longest 24-hours of his life, and it wasn't finished yet. He had followed the elder vampire outside, but, seeing nobody in the street, had tried the spell to detect Apparation traces and had found some. Apparation hop after apparation hop, he still wasn't close to his target. He even got lost at some point, and had spent many hours tracking the apparation jumps back until he found a loophole. The elder had apparated back and forth a few time, to lose him. Following the vampire, he had even found himself apparating 30 feet in the air on top of a spiked wall and, another time, he had fallen in the ocean. He had visited some places in northern France and the Scottish Highlands. Thankfully, the elder had to rest for the sunniest part of the day, and Stuart had almost found him again, but that was a moment ago, and he was losing him now. Hopefully, the vampire would be tired of all this jumping back and forth. The last jump he made, though, after a large loop around London, brought him back in the shoddy quarter where his partners found their end. Or so he thought. But that was his drive and he pushed himself to go after the vampire again.

He chased his target, on foot this time. Evidently, the elder had to be either exhausted or oblivious that Stuart succeeded in tracking him. After a few turns and close calls, he found the vampire in an open space, and decided that it would be the best place to surprise him. No statue to fall on your head, and all this sort of things. He started by a few well-aimed Cutting curses, hoping to weaken the elder even more.

The elder turned around. They gauged each other for a mere second, each one appreciating the stubbornness of the other, but forced by their nature to kill each other. That was the law of the jungle, and it was to be applied here and now.

Curses flew. Both were good duellers, and both were tired before beginning. They both used swords and magic, and the point-blank curses maimed and deformed parts of each other's body. The blades sliced and pierced through clothing, skin, and muscle. They jumped

around, avoiding large debris and small litter. They duelled for what seemed like hours for them, and only seconds from the outside world, when, in a sudden fluke of fate, they both impaled their swords through each other's heart. The fight had been so equal, that they had to die together, from the same wound. Still, the vampire wasn't exactly dead. After all, him being an elder meant that he wasn't to die from a mere stab wound. But the target has been his heart and he was now unable to move. If nobody was to save him, in his weakened state, the sun would kill him rapidly, in one hour at the most. He was that powerful, because newly-induced full vampires were subject to instant combustion instead. Only part-vampires were able not to burst into flames when in the sun. All these thoughts and facts didn't prevent him from bleeding heavily, though.

Stuart Lengley and the metamorphmagus vampire, whose fake identity was Gabriel Swift at that time, fell down together on a heap of rubble, before separating and rolling some feet in separate directions, the swords still embedded in their heart.

It was one hour and thirty minutes in the morning, and the flickering street lights revealed no witness to this scene whatsoever.  
Around the same time...

The fire had been fed by itself, the potion ingredients making sure of that. Even with their built-in resistance to fire, the wands of both Peter and Harry also exploded at some point, adding more fuel to the already raging inferno. The firemen sent to the place couldn't work the fire down, and they weren't even able to figure if that was an electrical fire or the result of a gas explosion. The remains of the car wreckage even suggested that oil could have been the origin. Whatever the source, the house burned to the ground, and the policemen sent afterwards only found the unidentifiable charred remains of the four occupants of the house. They would be identified as the Dursleys and their nephew.

Albus Dumbledore had been warned by the shrilling sound, but at midnight, any normal person was asleep, especially a person aged of more than 150 summers. And that is with a little bit of lateness that he found himself, much to his chagrin, in front of the smouldering remains of number 4, Privet Drive, between muggle firemen and

policemen running around. His eerie feeling was amplified by the permanent notice-me-not charm on his robes, making the muggles running around him not even aware of him. In a streak of unrelated understanding, he perceived that that was how ghosts were feeling, when only confronted to muggles. These muggles were speaking about the poor people there, four people that died in an inferno due to an unknown source. They spoke about the 'deceased' persons. The Dursleys. Harry.

He dropped to his aged knees, but didn't feel the physical pain. He was beyond pain now. He felt like rubbish. His charge was dead. He hadn't shared anything with Harry, like remembrance of his parents, or damned prophecies, and now he wouldn't be able to share anything with him anymore. Feeling a pat on his shoulder, he turned and took in the red-rimmed eyes of Mundungus Fletcher, the 'old friend from the old group' that he had asked to watch the house. Mundungus' breath smelt like a mix between good vodka and bad gin, but the man appeared sober in front of the charred remains of number 4, Privet Drive.

Swallowing his tears, something he hadn't thought he'd do again, the old Headmaster croaked, coughed, and finally asked "What... what happened?"

The silence from Mundungus was foreboding. Then his answer, uneasy, elicited more tears from Dumbledore. "I don't know." and he started to explain more.

"I was on post at midday, but the woman was alone at that moment. She went out often, looking around, as if waiting. Thus was spent most of the afternoon. My cover... well, I was to be seen as the drunk-on-the-bench, so I drank from time to time, and lost consciousness after eight. I remember looking at my watch at some point." he looked really shameful for this, but continued at the nod from his old friend. "But I'm sure that Harry never arrived home before eight."

Dumbledore's head shot up, intrigued. "What do you mean?"

“Dursley never showed his fat ass... well... for a long time, and Harry never showed himself either, I mean... at least not until I passed out.” Dumbledore’s frown deepened.

“Around nine, I got awakened by a loud crash. That was Dursley’s car embedding itself in their house. The bloke was more smashed than me, and he was ranting so loudly that he raised most of the neighbourhood. Turns out he has been fired by his company, among some other stuff. I was dead tired, so I assumed Harry had arrived during my nap, and I fell asleep again. Next thing I know, there are screams coming from the house, and fire erupting everywhere. Poor people. Poor Harry.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Albus Dumbledore was thinking. Hard. Something was tugging at the edge of his mind. He closed his eyes and started to meditate, hoping to catch the drifting thought, when he was interrupted by Fletcher.

“How comes you’re here, Albus?”

And that did it. The fleeting thought came back full force, making him stagger. Poor people, indeed! The device that had awakened him up was related to Harry’s blood protection ward. And there were only a few reasons for it to shrill that way, one of which being the blood-related person killing or allowing to kill the protected. That meant only one thing, and his eyes watered again as he was crushed under the responsibility of having forced Harry in the house of murderers.

Mundungus’ wristwatch quietly beeped two in the morning, but the mourning friends sitting on the bench didn’t notice it.

To be continued in next chapter: Mourning, and the Afterlife...

Tick, tick, tock, the death clock knocks,  
Doors open, even with locks.  
The part that follows, readers,  
Will be best for reviewers.

## Chapter 7 – Mourning, and the Afterlife

“...and, with the blessing from our hearts, may he get in his final rest the peace he never got in his life.”

With those final words, uttered in a voice strained by tears, Albus Dumbledore left the dais where was the coffin supposedly holding the charred remains of the Boy-who-Lived. There had been so few remains that no magical signature remained, thus preventing even magical identification. There had been a few awkward moments during three days, during which Albus Dumbledore had to negotiate to obtain the body. First with the policemen in charge of the forensics, then with Marge Dursleys, who had arrived as soon as her wayward dog allowed her, and who didn't want to leave the body at first, before agreeing because of a well-placed spell. Finally, they had been able to hold the burial.

The sun was getting into late afternoon, acquiring some fiery colours. There was no wind, and very few birds were piping around. Harry's name had already been added to his parents' grave standing near the dais, in gold letters. The small assembly containing only his closest friends and professors rose little by little. They hadn't thought that Harry would have wanted the press and everything, as he never did seek his fame while living. Besides, on such a short notice, only the people that were close to him had been called. Needless to say, they were all devastated, some even more than others. Ron was keeping a blank face, sometime laughing at nothing, but crying most of the time, while denying it. Hermione was badgering everybody, tactlessly telling them stories about them and Harry, and always finishing by “but he's dead now.” Worst of all was Ginny. During the most part of the day following the event, she had been moody, because of a bad nightmare. Upon hearing the news, she had collapsed, physically and mentally. She couldn't be awakened for a few hours, and was in denial since, always saying “He's not dead, Harry's not dead. I can feel it, he's not dead.”

They all went to the coffin, one after the other, to deliver a final word of farewell. During this, a grave Severus Snape approached the Headmaster.

“Care for a walk?”

The old man silently nodded, and they walked slowly away. Dumbledore was helping himself with a cane, something that, despite his age, nobody had ever seen him doing before that infamous morning.

“Albus, I want to apologize.”

This met only a nod from the old man. Severus understood that his aged superior wasn't up to speaking right now, and continued.

“I saw Harry in Diagon Alley yesterday.”

The teary eyes, which had lost their famous twinkle hours ago, looked up from the cemetery's grass to the dark eyes of the Potion Master. Sensing the inquiry, Snape explained.

“He had taken money from his account, and wanted to take the train to his relatives. They didn't fetch him. And I pushed him there, Albus. I'm sorry.”

Albus Dumbledore croaked something in the like of “Not your fault, mine” but was too wrapped up to elaborate. Snape wasn't finished, though. He turned towards Dumbledore, handing him an envelope.

“He also gave me this, for you. I didn't look at it, and didn't even remember it before... it happened.”

Still sad, but curious, the Headmaster took the envelope and looked at it expectantly. He was ready to open it, when a sudden scream of fury came from the place they left. He stowed the letter in his pocket and they came back as quickly as possible to the assembly. What they saw was a rather strange vision. Ginny Weasley was red. Not red from blushing. Not red from hitting something. No, she was red from rage, and she was holding an opened letter in her left hand and an owl in her right. And she was shaking the owl and ranting at it, as if that was the owl that killed Harry.

Feeling the need to 'protect the messenger', Snape and Molly Weasley, Ginny's mother, rushed to her side to take the owl away and to try to understand what started the tirade. After both being shouted at by a visibly distraught girl, her mother got the disgruntled owl back, and the professor got the letter. Ginny was oblivious, still, and continued to rant for a minute, before collapsing, sobbing, on the coffin. While her mother, having released the owl, tentatively tried to soothe her, Snape unfolded the letter and read it. Some seconds afterwards, he appeared that he was also going to explode, but he awkwardly picked up a potion from his pockets, and drank it. The effect was immediate and he could calmly read the letter aloud for everybody to understand it and Ginny's reaction.

Mister Potter,

We have been informed that a protection spell cast by yourself has been triggered in your home at number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, tonight, at midnight.

As you very well know, having already received a first notification of underage spellcasting, you are now thusly expelled from Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry (decree on restriction of magic of first cycle students, article 1875, parts D, U, M, and B).

Besides, we hereby inform you that, muggles having seen your display of magical happenstance, you are under a request for judicial procedure (Article 13 of the Secrecy Code issued by the International Confederacy of Wizardry). Present yourself to the Ministry tomorrow at 4pm sharp for further questioning.

Mafalda Hopkirk

Service of Underage Magic, under special supervision by the Minister's office

Ministry of Magic

As soon as he finished, Ginny, who was up and seething again, launched her tirade again. "The gall! And here they come, undoubtedly fooled by that magnificent coffin," she lowered her voice, but the small crowd was still able to hear her perfectly in the still afternoon "and the wonderful person inside... the most... gentle... and

loving... boy, that... graced the face... of earth.” and she collapsed again, sobbing, the pain too intense to be bearable. But after those few words, everyone that still doubted had the confirmation. Her indistinct moaning of denial of his death was lost in the double shock of the Ministry’s lack of tact and Ginny’s public acknowledgement of her feelings.

Ginny Weasley was in love with Harry Potter.

And that didn’t ease Albus Dumbledore’s feelings the slightest. Somewhere else, a few days before...

Dark.

Dark.

Immensely dark.

And no feeling.

Except a feeling of travelling through space, once.

Now it’s finished.

A shout.

“I DON’T WANT TO DIE!”

His soul screaming.

“I’M NOT MEANT TO DIE!”

Wake up, me!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Okay, don’t wake up. Too painful right now.

A faraway echo of crying.

Crying? I don't cry. Blokes don't cry.

Who said that?

I don't know. A friend, perhaps?

I have friends?

Silence.

I don't know.

I don't know anyone related to me.

I don't know... me.

Who am I?

More silence.

I don't like silence. What am I?

I was a human, that I remember.

But I was also a beast.

No. That was a dream.

But a friggin' good one!

I was human, nonetheless. That at least is secure.

And there was a girl. I like her. So I'm a guy.

Well, I already knew that, smart-ass.

Look who's sarcastic with who!

Okaaaay, so I'm having a little chit-chat with myself now.

'Fraid so.

Try to wake up, shall I? I don't like this place.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

Okay. Unbearable pain again. Let's stay here for a while.

Do I have a deck of cards to play with myself?

Ah ah. Very funny.

No kidding. I'm always funny.

Silence.

Am I?

I don't remember.

What do I remember?

The pain. Everywhere. Especially on my face.

A sword... I like swords! Err... no, that's not my line.

The girl. Hmmm... red hair?

Red hair is fine with me. I like red hair.

Okay. Let's play a game now. What other things are red?

Traffic lights.

Coke cans.

Wow. I remember things. Cool... let's continue.

Strawberries.

Birds.

Birds? Red? What kind of bird is red?

I don't remember. But it's a cool bird.

Hmmm...

What?

I remember an old man with the bird, but I don't see his face.

You know, you'd be an interesting case for a psychiatrist.

Nut-case.

Egg-head.

Let's stop arguing. If we are stranded here for all eternity, we should be friends.

Yeah, let's be friend with myself. Otherwise I'd really be a psycho case.

You know, all the stuff about the tunnel and light.

Yes? Of course I know. We know.

It's so... I don't know. I wish there was a light.

Silence.

And still darkness.

And no feelings.

Normally I like silence.

I do?

But now I don't.

Let's play the game again, then. What do we know?

Silence.

A castle. A big one.

A snake. Two snakes. Plenty of snakes!

Shouldn't I be afraid of snakes?

I don't know. I'm not.

Silence.

Wait.

What?

I hear things.

Me too.

That's for sure. We hear the same things. Now stop and try to listen.

Silence.

See? You frightened it.

Don't say "you" or we're going schizophrenic.

Shall I say that I frightened it?

No! Now shut up.

That's my line!

Just shut up. They are battling.

Who?

I don't know.

Friends?

I don't know.

Silence.

Foes?

I hope not.

Silence.

I hope they stop going back and forth, they are affecting the reception.

Ah, here they are again.

But I hear nothing.

But they are here.

Ah? Where?

On top of me.

Really?

Yes. Care to wake up?

Let's try.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH...”

Shove it, it's still painful.

Friend or foe, I hope they calm that pain.

A stirring.

What?

I feel...

...strange.

Like in a shower.

A hot shower.

A hot shower of some vitalizing water.

Aaaaaaahhhh... that feels good!

Let's worship the person helping me.

Again.

Again!

I think it stopped.

I feel weird.

But now, I have feelings. Still numb, but feelings nonetheless.

Thankfully, it's numb. Have you seen that arm?

Oh, my! Definitely out of service.

Think not. Look. It's repairing itself.

Why?

What am I? An encyclopaedia?

Okay, okay, just asking.

Look at our legs.

Ouch! That wound must have been painful.

Hey! It's not even repairing correctly!

Are you crying over God's little gifts?

Am certainly not. Looks like my body is complete.

My body, too.

Well, we share a body, you nitwit.

Now that it's repaired, can we wake? I need to stretch my legs.

Wait a second. There is a problem.

Huh?

Our eyes. They got burnt. And one is sliced.

I want to see! I want to see!

Am I sure that that's what I want, rather than completely repairing my legs?

Yes! Yes!

...because it seems the energy shower is finished, and we have energy only for one.

You sound like a repair garage technician.

What's that?

Errrrmm... someone repairing cars?

Okay. Now. Sight?

Yes! Sight!

The darkness acquires color.

Sooo coooool...

Shut up, you sound like you're high.

Better than this down-trodden place. Let's wake up, now. I'm fed up with here.

Let's.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH! God! That hurts!”  
The outside world...

On a pile of rubble, there were three bodies. Three dead bodies. Suddenly, the bottommost rose with a deep intake of breath, before collapsing, exhausted and panting. It was five in the morning.

Now, two hours after, the sun had been showing for some time, and, among the three bodies, one had been a vampire. That generally poses a survival problem. Slowly, painfully, ever so painfully that he was paralysed by his wound, his flesh had transformed into ashes, most of it being dispersed by the wind, leaving a rather empty black garment. The sword, that had been holding his heart still, had dislodged from the black clothes at some point, and had fallen through cracks in the pile of rubble.

The panting body rose again, this time accustomed to living. He felt himself all over, trying to find broken bones and the like, but everything appeared in order. He was clad in burnt rags but, on top of him, he found a set of black clothes with some ashes in it. 'Who's stupid enough to put ashes in clothes on purpose?' he reflected, while shaking them clean. 'Was it me?' He gathered the clothes, then turned around, taking in his surroundings. The first thought is 'shoddy'

and the second is 'too bright'. Strange, the sun never had this effect on him before. He thought hard, while leaving the rubble pile, limping towards some shadow. No recollection. Of anything. At all. Just some fleeting thoughts, about a girl with fiery hair. 'So clichéd. I remember nothing but the maiden.' he thought. And bizarrely, he didn't feel bad about calling her The Maiden, as in The Knight, The Beast, and The Maiden. Speaking of which, he also remembered a richly decorated sword, without defined shape, though. All this called for something in him, something he probably forgotten. His only other memory was about a book. Frowning, he seemed to remember perfectly everything from the book, but without understanding any of it. It was as if he had memorized by heart a book in a language he was not proficient with. And, while he was storing this information away, not to use it anytime soon, it disturbed him greatly.

'Well, I should dress myself' he thought suddenly, interrupting his reverie. He removed the rags that covered him, and put the black clothes. 'They fit so well they must be mine', he reflected. Putting them on, though, he felt that his face was not healed, and had suffered injuries. Searching for a mirror around him, he also remarked that he was only seeing with one eye. His surroundings didn't have depth, and he was a little wobbly from the vertigo that held him for a few minutes. During his recovery, he put his hands in his pockets, and recovered some identification papers and very little money. The identification had a picture of a guy with black hair and brownish eyes, and a name: Gabriel Swift. Finding a rear-view mirror in a wretched car nearby, he was first shocked of the level of injury his face got. He had obviously been badly burnt, because of the crisp skin. He also was raked through the face and left eye and that scar looked like it came from a feline paw. And all this was still painful to the touch. His right eye was dark, with a red tint in them, like dark crimson. It gave him an uneasy feeling, but, checking with the picture again, he came to decide that that would be him. He tentatively tried to speak, but his voice was all raspy from the injuries his throat had endured. Swallowing, and trying again, he successfully talked to himself – again. "Hello, me."

Apart from his new identification papers, he didn't have anything of interest, though. Anything? He sensed something on his right hand,

and looked down. A signet ring with “G/S” on it. That sealed it, he was convinced now. His name was Gabriel Swift.

What little was left of Harry Potter left the shoddy area towards the city, and a new life.

Ministry of Magic, conference room, 4pm the same day of the following week...

“Please, ladies and gentlemen, witches and wizards, please, calm down.”

The ruckus didn’t quiet down. The spokesperson looked like he was lost. He tried a last time.

“Please calm down. The Minister of Magic will be here shortly to answer your questions, but you have to calm yourself.”

The mention of Cornelius Fudge’s eventual presence caused the room to rise in an uproar. As if on cue, thinking that people were acclaiming him, the Minister entered the room through a stage door and got on the podium. “Ladies and gentlemen,” started the spokesperson, but he couldn’t continue, the noise being deafening.

Still, Cornelius Fudge was oblivious and didn’t remark that people were not eager to see him, but rather furious. Some were even banging their chair on the floor to add to the commotion.

It all started by an article, taking up the whole front page of the morning’s Daily Prophet, explaining the life and death of Harry Potter. In an example of their mastery of the verb, Fred and Georges, aided by a revenge-hungry Ginny, had written their explanation of their friend’s life. It was mostly true, just shadowing Dumbledore’s role. The old man was stricken by grief, and even if they had some harsh questions to ask, it wouldn’t do any good to destroy him publicly like that. The Minister of Magic, that was another story. If the bumbling fool could be taken down a peg or two, or twenty, anything was game. From underlying the financial support Fudge got from families known as Death Eaters, to his management of Voldemort appearance as a

possessing spirit, and his special and personal supervision of the tactless Service of Underage Magic. They had signed under a false name, of course, because nobody would take them seriously at that time. But they were here, in the first rank of the conference room when the Minister arrived on stage, and were decided to change the way things worked. In that regard, one of their actions had been to call for that press meeting with the Minister, inviting only those reporters that weren't corrupt yet, judging by the honesty of their articles. And that hadn't given exactly the same attendance than usual Ministry press meetings. They were more, and they were out of control.

The Minister was finally taking the room in, and the angry faces of reporters in front of him began to unnerve him. Still, to keep his dignity intact, he couldn't very well flee after such an entrance. After all, the elections were the following year, and he had to strengthen his political status even more.

Rising on their feet, an executioner's grim expression on their face, the Weasley twins then stood on their chairs on each side of the front row, and held their hands in the air to placate the angry journalists. This was working a little, and the Minister sent them a thankful, but dismissive, look and started to speak.

"Thank you for being here tod..."

But he was promptly cut by the twins who, acting like they rehearsed a piece, spoke together.

"People, the Minister is here, so, we'd like to cut that short. For your information, we are the authors of today's offending article." This elicited some murmurs among the assembled crowd. "Please base your questions on it. We'll direct the interrogation and fill in the blanks. Who wants to start?"

Fudge's jaw was hanging, while almost all the reporters present raised their hands. He tried to catch the control of the situation again. "Now, listen here, young men..."

The dark look the twins and, come to think of it, most of the room also, sent his way was a bad sign. He gulped audibly, while the twins selected a well-dressed blonde young woman from the third row to start. Unbeknownst to all, the woman, a mere columnist for weather forecast at the Daily Prophet, had arrived first in the room. The twins had had some time to prepare her for the slaughter, and they also had told her the question to ask first.

“Laura Girard, Daily Prophet.” That sounded very professional, and other reporters, especially from the Daily Prophet itself, looked at her questioningly. Then they remembered the small and mousy columnist, and acknowledged her belonging to their newspaper to the other reporters. During this interchange, though, Laura continued to speak. “I want to know how it comes our Minister is hand-in-hand with those listed dark practitioners.”

“Which ones?” Fudge blurted out without paying attention. “Errm... that’s not how it was intended to sound... I never knowingly associated with dark practitioners. Never! My job is to keep the wizarding world safe, why would I associate with such bad people?” Fudge smiled, thinking that his witty retort reinstated his control of the room.

“Why, indeed?” the high-pitched, scolding exclamation came from the red-headed young witch on the first row.

“If you think fooling us with your choice of words, Minister, you are sadly mistaken...” started Fred.

“...and insulting our intelligence. ‘knowingly’ indeed. I doubt that Death Eaters come to you with their masks on.”

“So you can safely answer like that.”

“Unless you are a Death Eater yourself, Minister.” the back-and-forth questioning was unnerving for the slightly panting Minister. It was like watching a match of the muggle sport called tennis, the only problem being that he was the ball. The onslaught was furious, as were his executioners. “Are you?”

“What?” he tried to regain his composure once more.

“Prove it. Prove that you are not a Death Eater.” Fred started again, the talk once again going back and forth between the twins.

“So that you get the chance that some innocent didn’t have when sent in Azkaban.”

“Contrarily to some proven Death Eaters that you personally freed from the clutches of justice! And you got the gall to deny your links with them! Their pledge for being under the Imperious curse was thoughtful, but, tell us Minister. How many persons can you hold under that curse?”

“Errm...” the Minister was buffeted. “One?”

The twins smiled. They had asked and researched to get that information, and had rehearsed a good part of the exchange, counting on the Minister’s bubbly self-image to burst. And they were so intent with their piercing attacks that the initially portly man on stage was visibly deflated. Looking at each other, they continued.

“How do you know?” asked Fred loudly.

“And then, how many Dark Lords would have been necessary to hold all your so-called friends under the Imperious at the same time? Ten? Twenty?”

That destroyed the last shreds of control Cornelius Fudge thought he was having. Were he able to think clearly, he would have noticed that, due to their fiery hair and temper, the twins and the girl were most likely to belong to the Weasley clan. But as the target of a verbal lynching, trying to save his hide was his top priority. Being out of his right mind, he committed blunder upon blunder when the free-for-all ensued.

Azkaban, wizarding high-security prison, cell number 7419...

The convict number Kappa-Psi-390 was angry. That is, in the rare moments of lucidity the Dementors allowed him. Even if the Ministry hadn't been keen on recognizing the Dark Lord reappearance, the shifts had been doubled, and that had left him even less time to be himself.

His old cellmate had been a wrinkled man that had had the misfortune of inadvertently killing his Death Eater wife by banishing her over the balcony, the fall effectively killing her. His wife's friends had been corrupting the Minister, and the man had been too devastated to even defend himself. Still, he had time to tell his story before definitely going mad from the Dementors' effect. His progressive lack of strength had prevented him from eating, thus worsening his condition little by little, and now he was dead.

His new cellmate, a young and real Death Eater, had been stupid enough to gloat over his victims' body when his 'friends' left the place, to be replaced by arriving Aurors. He had perhaps mistaken the departure and arrival apparation pops. Anyways, as he had been caught red-handed, the trial happened so swiftly that his judges couldn't be corrupted in time. The first two things he said upon his arrival in the cell, though, had infuriated its other occupant. The first being that his Death Eater superior was influent enough to get himself out of there in no time. And the other was a recounting of the day's Daily Prophet front page. In itself, that was not meaningful enough to infuriate anyone, it was only regular bragging and news casting. It was the name of his superior and the name of a dead boy that provoked the reaction. Peter Pettigrew and Harry Potter.

Sirius Black was angry, and already on the verge of madness. In his long stay in the prison, it had helped to be an animagus. In his animagus form, he didn't feel most of the dementing effect of Azkaban guards. The Dementors sensed human's emotions, but animals' were blurry to them. And they don't have real eyes anyways. It did also help that he didn't register as an animagus all these years ago, when, still a student, he and his friends helped Remus Lupin through his monthly transformations. Otherwise, his cell would have been enhanced with an anti-transformation hex. As it was, he had a plan, but had been waiting for a drive and an opportunity. He had already had opportunities when they switched dead prisoners for live

ones, four times during his stay. But his drive had been lowered by his weakened state. Now that he was glowing with fury, he desperately wanted out. He had missed his godson's life, and the cause of all his torments was alive. Any human would be enraged at this, but when taking a wizard, you could have a free fireworks display.

The first thing he did, while enraged at the other man's words, was to beat him to an inch of his life. The beating took a small part of his anger away, but he didn't want to kill him. Even in his rage, he realized he didn't want to be Kissed by a Dementor for a real murder. Any murder in Azkaban had always been swiftly quieted while the murderer was experiencing the Dementors' fatal attack, the Kiss. It has been said that the victims of this attack stay soulless and their bodies decay on the spot. Sirius wanted to exact revenge on his life and Harry's, and he was hoping that the Dementors would be called in by the ruckus. Sensing their approach, he quickly turned into the form of a big black dog, even if underfed, and waited for them close to the wall next to the barred door. As soon as the two guards entered, confident in their fear-inducing abilities, he stumbled outside his cell.

Freedom!

The feeling was exhilarating.

But he didn't have time to revel, as he was still in the prison yet. Even if the Dementors, thinking he was an animal, saw only a blurry form in him, they might catch him. And there were also human guards on the outskirts. Hiding in an alcove to let another patrol pass, he reflected on his escape plan.

To be continued in next chapter: The Fair and the Fool...

That's it, you say, you knew that!  
I couldn't kill the wee brat.  
Shall I keep you on your toes  
With the rest? Review, fellows!

## Chapter 8 – The Fair and the Fool

Gabriel Swift was limping, and it was annoying. He remembered, during his recovery, having chosen to repair his right eye instead of his leg, but the whole dream was unclear to him. How could one choose which part to heal? It didn't make any sense to him, but he was limping anyway.

His first encounter with the outside world, since he woke on the dump, has been with a group of six young ruffians living in the very same shoddy area, and they had attacked him suddenly, beaten him unconscious, and stolen his money. The action had been so rapid that he barely had had time to notice the skull-decorated cloth mask that the apparent leader was wearing. Awakening with difficulty some time afterwards, he had found his papers crumpled beside the nearest trashcan. So, that's with the greatest difficulties that he was moving around, afraid of every loud group of people. He spent most of the days sleeping in trashy alcoves, moving by night towards downtown London. He didn't know why, but he was sure that he would recognize something or someone there. His lack of finances proved difficult, and he had to beg for a coin or two in the morning and evening. Moreover, his scarred appearance doubled with his smell didn't help anything.

Gabriel spent his nights wandering around in his dishevelled state. He survived by eating remains from trashcans, and, surprisingly, live animals found in the streets. He discovered that eating still warm flesh, and drinking its blood gave him more energy than anything else. That disturbed him greatly, but he was surviving, and that consideration didn't prevent him from continuing. After a week of wandering, Gabriel noticed an area with much light, activity, and laughter. Not knowing what it was, he approached cautiously, and discovered the area containing the city's funfair. The stall keepers were boisterously promoting their show and activities, and the kids and teenagers were laughing and generally having a grand time. Looking around, he was dumbfounded that such a place existed, not having any remembrance of something like that. Then he shook his head. He didn't have any remembrance at all, so it was no mystery that he didn't recognize a funfair. Shrugging his feelings of discovery aside, he started to explore the place, still wary of the different group

of people there. However, undoubtedly due to his impoverished appearance, nobody came close to him.

He spent the best part of one hour walking around, gawking at the many proposed activities. Some rough teens sometimes made fun of him because of his scarred face, and little kids were afraid of him, as well as some adults. He suddenly stopped at a stall, where a young teenage girl, supposedly the keeper's daughter, was arranging the prizes. Having her back to him, he noticed only her hair, but that was sufficient. He stood there, transfixed. She had fiery red hair.

His heart was banging against his ribcage, and his mind was whirling around one of his few memories of before. Maybe he had known the girl? Maybe...

She turned around, laughing at a joke from her father. Sure, she looked like him a little. And Gabriel saddened immediately because her face didn't fit with his still unclear memory. Still, her hair was so beautiful that he would have spent the whole night looking at her. However, the moment she left the stall through a backdoor, his stomach decided it was a perfect time to rumble, remembering himself of his famished state. Looking longingly to the shop exit, as if it was going to bring her back, he gathered his meagre coins, and, after a last look on the stand, wandered a little more in search for some food to grab.

He smelled fried sausage somewhere, and, despite being starved and going to eat there anyway, he winced at painful but unknown memories. Hesitantly, he gathered his courage and money, and went towards the food stand. On his way to there, he noticed another show. And stopped.

It was a horror train ride, and, looking at the depicted ghosts, vampires, and other undead, he frowned. He knew that, deep inside his scrambled mind, he should know about these monsters. Perhaps he worked there? His hunger temporarily forgotten, he approached the counter, held by a wrinkled old woman, and noticed a sheet of paper showing 'help wanted, inquire here'.

The woman didn't even look at him when he approached, and merely stated "Fifty pence a ride, sonny."

When she didn't hear money clinking on the counter, or the client departing, she looked up, and couldn't hide a gasp when she saw the burnt face of Gabriel, still looking at the paper, with, on his face, something akin to... hope?

Looking at the paper herself, and back to him, she said, in a business-like voice "I'm looking for someone to keep the ride in check, animate the monsters, and generally helping around here. Also selling tickets when I'm not up to it, which is quite often nowadays, sadly. The previous kid went out of the country with his parents, so there."

When he didn't answer, she turned back towards her magazine, and muttered "If you are interested, feel free to ask, as soon as you get your voice back."

Gabriel was astonished. A job! He didn't recall having a job before. Of course, he didn't recall anything. And he didn't even know his own age. How old was he? Looking at his crumpled papers, he read that he's 15, and his face wasn't giving anything away anyway. So, trembling, afraid that his stroke of luck might leave him the moment he starts to speak, he croaked, coughed, and started again.

"When... when do I start?"

She leaned towards him, looking at him inquiringly, but her aged eyes couldn't see if he had been mistreated or if he just suffered of sequels from an old accident. She needed a hand to help her managing the ride, though, and was ready to take him in right there. However, after the dump episode and the week sleeping in the streets, his stench was almost unbearable. She curtly answered "As soon as you take a shower." Then, seeing his lost air, she took pity of the obviously poor teen. "Come here, there is no client right now, and it's a low time anyways. Follow me." She said, while getting out and closing the booth. She then led him towards several parked mobile homes. Opening one, she motioned him inside, and told him to clean himself before coming back to the booth.

And that closed the deal. The funfair employees were given more-or-less leeway about work regulations concerning age, because of so many whole families in the business. The woman just asked his papers once, to get his name and age. And now, he was working on the train ride, had a steady little income, and was lodged and fed by the old maid herself. Nothing fanciful, but heating and regular food was always preferred over the dangerous and damp streets. He even got to live close to the place where he had spotted the red-haired girl. Things couldn't be better.

At the same time, near the hamlet of Ottery Saint Catchpole...

Ginny Weasley was sad, angry, and happy at the same time, a detonating mixture. She had already snapped once at her mother, and twice at her brothers, and she was now staying under her favourite tree in her home's garden. What she was happy about, though, was the sudden appearance of a big, white, and feathery lump in her lap. She recognized the thing immediately, despite its underfed and tired state.

"Hedwig!"

Exhausted, the white bird fell asleep in her arms, and, turning her over, Ginny noticed some blood on her feathers. Unknown to her, the Dursleys had chased Hedwig around until she left Privet Drive. The owl had tried to reach Harry afterwards, but her owl compass was failing, and after some days of almost non-stop flying, she was out.

Hedwig was one more link to Harry, and Ginny decided on the spot that, until she could get back to Harry, she was going to adopt the owl. Her mind, still in denial, already planned to use her to send messages to Harry, wherever he was. Going back to the Burrow, with the now sleeping owl in her arms, she barged in the kitchen where the family was having the afternoon tea. Everyone was here, and everyone was startled by the grinning Ginny and especially the dishevelled owl in her arms.

Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Headmaster office...

Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk, his eyes unfocused. The accumulated paperwork on his desk was reaching record heights. Grieving, and angry at himself, he shouted an impolite curse and lunged at the mountains of reports and forms. Papers flew in the room for a time, some of them reaching the foyer and experiencing instant combustion, until the Headmaster seemed to calm himself a little. Getting up and sighing, he magically collected the fallen paperwork, before turning around his desk to sit in front of the chimney.

Looking at the soothing flames there, he was reflecting about his responsibilities again, speculating about what could have been done differently. Suddenly, he noticed something strange in the fire. Of all the papers that had flown through the room, of the dozen sheets that had burned when touching the fire, there was a charred envelope there, right between the logs. And its content was not burning.

Now, magic was a well-known field for Albus Dumbledore, but he seldom used non-flammable paper for his regular office work. The only time people he had used this kind of paper was when...

He shuddered.

This kind of paper was used to write wills.

Bending, and reaching with the fire tools, he got the paper from the flames. Even if it didn't burn, it was still very hot, and he had to breathe on it for a time before unfolding it. What he saw, though, made him drop the paper as if it was white-hot again.

There, on the floor, was the accusation of two dead persons. If this paper had been found a decade ago, an innocent man wouldn't have been sent to prison, and a culprit would have been sought after. A child wouldn't have had to live through hell, and a man would have had joys and challenges of surrogate parenting. And a boy wouldn't be dead, causing him to grieve. This was the letter proving the innocence of Sirius Black, the letter that Harry found in his vault, and that Severus gave to him on the burial. And to think that he almost lost it to the fire!

Defeated, he slumped on his chair, the accusing paper still in front of him. And it was a long time before his sense of responsibilities forced him to make a fire-call he would have most difficulties to explain. Later, at the Burrow...

Hermione had been invited for dinner that evening, and things hadn't gone smoothly at all. Her logical mind had, in one way or another, completely squished her emotional self. To Ginny and Ron, to the horror of the other Weasleys, she had been repeating that Harry was dead, and that was all. She had even suggested they start on their homework. Ron had been silent since the burial, his mind seemingly disconnected somehow. Contrarily to Hermione, it seemed that his emotional mind engulfed his logic. He had even lost the three chess games he played against his siblings. To everybody, that alone was a sign that Ron wasn't coping well with Harry's death.

The weirdest part of the evening had been when they were drinking tea and trying to relax in the living room, Hermione still babbling about homework and berating Ron for his lack of attention. Ron suddenly stood up and left the room, still without uttering a sound. Everyone was aghast at Hermione's speech, and even more at Ron when he appeared again in the room, his wand in hand, pointing towards Hermione. Without explaining, without even a trace of feelings on his face and voice, he uttered his first word in many days.

"Silencio."

Needless to say, everyone was even more dumbfounded than before. Even more so when the family was at odds with the Minister and the Service of Underage Magic. The silence was so intense that it seemed as if Ron had cast the spell on the whole room. The blank-faced teenager then got some Floo powder in his hand, and showed the chimney to a forcibly silent, fuming Hermione. When, still silently yelling at him, she didn't move, he threw the powder in the fire, mumbling "Granger's". He then waited next the green fire, arms crossed, for her to get out. When she still didn't move, he went to her, and, as blankly as before, bodily pushed her in the flames, towards her own home.

The other family members had been watching the whole scene, too flabbergasted to even move a finger. And Ron went back to his seat and sipped his tea as if nothing had happened. After a long time, during which Ginny and the twins stared at Ron with something akin to respect in their eyes, whereas their parents looked horrified, Ron stood up and left the room towards his bedroom. After this, Arthur and Molly went into a frantic discussion about Hermione and responsibilities; the twins muttered darkly to each other; and Ginny stayed silent, watching the fireplace. Hermione didn't return that evening, nor the following days.

Some hours after Hermione's expulsion from the Weasley house, Ginny woke up from her slumber, sweating from a nightmare. In her dream, she had been on Privet Drive when the fire had happened, and she has seen Harry, burnt everywhere, going out of the house towards her, his croaky voice asking her "Why? Why?"

Unable to get some sleep right now, she descended towards the kitchen with the purpose of making herself some tea, when, passing next to the twins' room, she heard voices muttering. 'It appears my pranking brothers are up to something', she reflected. She was ready to leave towards the kitchen again when the door opened suddenly, and a sleep-deprived and stern-faced Fred opened the door. He and his twins had a strange gleam in their eyes, and Ginny was a bit afraid that they could pull one of their infamous pranks on her right now.

"Enter, Gin."

She hesitantly went through the doorway, and sat on one of their beds. She noticed that the floor and their worktable were littered with rolls of hand-written scrolls. As they both had a quill in their ink-blotted hand, she suspected that they were either doing their homework, or planning something. Knowing her brothers, she immediately jumped to the latter conclusion.

"What are you up to?"

Silence met her question. Strange. Generally, these two shared their material with her, as she was as much a prankster as them, although less successful, not having a twin herself. Unless...

“It doesn’t concern me, does it?” She asked in a little voice.

More silence, but interrupted by Georges’ yawn. Fred sighed.

“No, Ginny, you are not the target. I hope that nobody we know will be soon. As you were listening, and as you are as deep in that... shituation... as we are, we deemed that you could be let in on.”

“What prank is it?” she asked.

As silence meets her request, she turned towards the scrolls, and started to read bits. As comprehension dawned on her face, George stated “This is not prank material.”

“We took a personal oath that we wouldn’t jokingly prank anyone anymore.” continued Fred.

Ginny was taken aback by this. How could it be? They were natural born pranksters, how could they stop this? And what about this work around them?

“What we are doing now, it’s hard to explain...” a silence, then “...we develop weapons. Like pranks, because we are versed in these, but lethal.”

Ginny was even more stunned at this. Lethal? Were her brothers going to be murderers? Worried, she stood and started to inch towards the door, when Fred words placated her.

“ Last year, because of Harry’s encounter with Voldemort, Dumbledore has reunited an old group, dedicated to fight against dark lords. Some weeks ago, he asked us to provide debilitating prank material that could be used against the Death Eaters. But we now feel that we can do much more than that.”

The rest of the night was spent explaining the different traps, and Ginny, while not wholeheartedly accepting the severe turn in her brother's activity, understood the goal and even offered comments on some of the ideas.

The next day found everyone waking late. The parents seemed to have cried their eyes out, and Ron was blank as before, apart from a comment that surprised everyone.

“The sun is beautiful.”

Now, this wasn't a surprising thing to say on a beautiful sunny day. But the rain was pouring on the house and grounds, and the sentence, as well as Ron's voice, was so out of context that Ginny instantly thought that Ron was channelling Luna Lovegood at this point. Deciding to take a break, and planning something, she grabbed some parchment and a self-refilling quill, and went in her bedroom with Hedwig.

Once there, she tried to write a letter to Harry, unsuccessfully at first. After all, you seldom wrote to dead people, even in the magical world. After some unsuccessful attempts, and many tears, she managed to simply express her feelings, on one of her peach-coloured stationery.

To my one and only love,

Where are you? I miss you.

Ginny

She then tied the message on Hedwig's leg, telling her nothing. Many people had already tried to write to Harry at some point, and failed, their mail coming back unopened. Her plan was that, if owls could find people using their name, why couldn't they find them using their emotions? So, she hoped that her message would arrive to its destination. It has an ice cube's chance in hell, but, on the off-chance that Harry's body was mistakenly identified, it could work. Opening her window, she sent Hedwig to the now-clear sky. And, watching the bird depart towards the unknown, she couldn't refrain from thinking 'Ron was right, the sun is beautiful.'

During this time, her brother Percy had received an owl from the Ministry and was discussing heatedly with their father.

“They accepted me! I can work there for the summer, and plant some ideas so that I could work there directly after I graduate!”

“Can’t you wait for the Ministry to be less corrupt?”

“How can you say that? You are working there!”

“Still, the Creatures department...”

“...is needing people, and they think I can work my way up quickly!”

Arthur sighed, and, after staring at his defiant son for a moment, gave in. “Very well. Just be careful, son.”

Percy snorted, and left the room.  
In Privet Drive...

The large black dog that contained the soul of the escaped convict had just arrived in Privet Drive a moment before, and he was now whimpering on the rubble that was number 4. If a dog could cry, this one would. But he also had another goal to achieve before allowing himself too much self-pity. Peter Pettigrew. The only way to find this kind of character was to search the shoddiest places of the wizarding world.

The animagus form of Sirius Black jumped over the debris, and started to prowl the street towards a remote area where he could transform back into a human and apparate away. Once in an alcove of Knockturn Alley, he transformed back into a dog, and went down the alley towards the substandard taverns there. If he had known what was going on in the Ministry at that time, perhaps he would have taken another less dangerous path.  
In the Minister’s office...

Cornelius Fudge was aghast. And furious. And any other feeling in between. But natural reaction is always prevailing, and his face's colour started to drift towards plum. He looked indignantly at the paper in front of him, on his neat and otherwise empty desk. For as long as he entered into office, he had tried to maintain a level of tidiness on his desk, thus giving the appearance of efficiency. In fact, it was his many secretaries who were dealing with his daily work. The paper was not only disturbing this, but its content was what shocked him the most. This, and the grim faces of the seven people in front of him.

"I can't accept this! It's not possible, and it's not legal!" he bellowed to the Heads of the seven Ministry departments.

"I'm afraid it is, Cornelius. And we are not giving you much choice. It is possible, it is legal, and it is done." Amelia Bones was generally a good person, but, being Head of the Magical Law Enforcement department, she learnt to display severity when necessary. And she was using it full-force, now.

"I'm sure it's not legal! I locked all possible procedures against my office when I arriv..." Cornelius interrupted his rant, paling at what he just admitted. The others in the room smirked at the admittance.

"Just for you to know, Cornelius," continued Amelia Bones, "we are recording this right now. We might even send it to the press. And you just sawed the branch you were sitting on. We already knew that you changed all these laws, years ago. But you weren't thorough enough, and we uncovered one. If a vote of no confidence was to be made against the Minister by more than two-thirds of the Ministry employees, the Minister has to resign."

"How comes I wasn't informed?"

"When we discovered this, we quietly inquired about your impact on Ministry employees that weren't under direct supervision by your office. The result is that all of them voted against you. We didn't even

have to get the votes from your underlings to complete the required quota.”

A pause, while the Minister digested that bit of information, before she continued. “Moreover, we also uncovered that some procedures that you pushed along were not quite abiding to the law.” She took a piece of paper from her pocket and resumed. “You have freed dark wizards, and, to placate the public, have allowed innocent people to be imprisoned at the same time.” Looking intently at the Minister, she asked “Tell me, Fudge, who is Peter Pettigrew?”

Concerned by the non-sequitur, the Minister was slow to answer. “Errm... it was a long time ago. Something to do with Sirius Black, I gather. That’s it! Pettigrew was a good man, and died fighting the infamous Death Eater Sirius Black. And we made sure that he went to Azkaban. I even forbade a trial due to pressing charges!” He gloated. He was so sure of himself and wanting to placate his Heads of departments, that he didn’t notice their smiles, again.

“That you did.” Implacably, the Head of Magical Law Enforcement pressed on. “Didn’t you find strange that your usual clique, usually intent on freeing other Death Eaters, didn’t intervene then?”

“No, why? Errm... sorry, that went wrong.”

“Thank you again for your new blunder, dear soon-to-be-ex Minister. That just tells us you were indeed in league with those. It will be my pleasure to send you to Azkaban personally, but I have something else I have to say before doing so. Sirius Black wasn’t a Death Eater. He wasn’t Potter’s secret keeper. And he didn’t kill Peter Pettigrew and these muggles all these years ago. Pettigrew did all this. You condemned an innocent man without even a trial.”

“Insanity! You can’t...”

“Here is the proof.” Amelia gave him the paper she was holding, with a little smile.

“It’s a fake! It can’t be real!”

“I assure you that it’s the original.”

Cornelius Fudge, knowing that he was beaten, merely read the offending paper before throwing it in his office lit fireplace. “There! There is no proof anymore!”

Going slowly towards the fireplace, Amelia Bones spoke again. “If you had read the paper correctly, Fudge, you would have noticed that it cannot be burnt. Accio!” and the smoking, but intact, paper flew back in her gloved hand. Its dragonhide layer merely hissed at the hot object’s temperature, but its built-in resistance to fire prevented the woman to be burnt herself.

Amelia Bones and the other Heads of Ministry departments raised their heads, their smiles vanishing. The tone she then took seemed so official that Cornelius couldn’t do anything, transfixed by his own demise.

“With the power our people placed in our hands, having questioned our peers, and being commissioned by the Wizengamot high warchief, we, Heads of the Ministry of Magic departments, hereby declare you, Cornelius Fudge, unable to persist in the function you occupy now. You are stripped of every Ministry-induced rank, titles, property and riches. You are also deemed guilty of the crimes you’ve been accused to, to which we add ‘intent of proof destruction’. You’ll be sent to Azkaban this instant, and a trial will be held later to determine if you’ll receive the Dementor Kiss for your treason towards the magical world.”

Cornelius Fudge had paled more and more during the tirade, and his eyes were darting from left to right, until they lock on his fireplace. He ran towards it, and, taking a handful of Floo powder, threw them in the fire. He then ran into the flames, shouting “Minister’s Hideaway”.

Nothing happened.

Well... something happened.

Cornelius' feet and legs took fire as he was standing stupidly in his own fireplace. Yelling in pain, he stumbled out of it, while the Heads laughed at his stupidity. Between her laughs, Amelia bent towards him, extinguished the flames, and said "Do you really think we would have come here, to tell you all this, without shutting your Floo access first? We also made sure that you can't Apparate, even if you don't have a licence yourself."

She recovered from the laugh, and then called "Guards!"

Two large Aurors entered the room. "Take this... man... to Azkaban." Nodding, as if everything was explained to them beforehand, they took hold of the slumped Minister's shoulders, and activated a portkey to the Azkaban travelling platform.

Sighing, Amelia Bones turned back towards her colleagues. "That went smoothly. Now is the difficult part. Who wants to take his seat?"

To be continued in next chapter: Rescue Missions...

The fool is gone, already?

I always thought he was shoddy.

And my old pal Gabriel

Has a future, now. So, well...

Author's Notes: For some reason, I can't write children properly, and Gabriel's character seems a bit too mature for his age. Don't forget, though, that Gabriel doesn't remember his own identity and age. His only link is the fake identification paper of the dead vampire, which states that he's 15. Unconsciously, the Dursleys' upbringing had put some serious blocks on his ability to enjoy his childhood, too. Another thing to consider is the absorption of the vampire blood, coupled with Harry's small shape-shifting abilities. He had grown an inch or five, and appears older.

## Chapter 9 – Rescue Missions

Percival Weasley had argued with his father to join his current job. And, thorough and stubborn as he generally was, he wanted to do it well. Even if he now knew why his father hadn't been speaking of the department in good terms. The laws of the Ministry of Magic concerning the plethora of known and unknown magical creatures were more than one could digest in one go. And Percy's job was, for the most part, to strengthen these law's text, that is, to research which obscure article served as base to a given law, and so forth. Once this was done for one law, you had a text ten times as big. And there were so many of them...  
Nearby...

Kingsley Shacklebolt wasn't as happy as he was before. He had been satisfied that the team of Aurors destroyed the two vampires, but utterly wounded about the deaths of Melinda and John. Especially about Melinda, as she seemed to have suffered the most. The state of Tonks was only slightly better, as she was still unconscious in St Mungo. And he was annoyed that Auror Stuart was missing.

Crossing a new young employee in the department corridors, and wanting to know everyone around him, he stopped him in his usual way, quite rudely. Unfortunately, the young man had had his head in the clouds generated by his work, and his arms were full of papers. Percy fell down, throwing law texts everywhere. Taking pity of the young redhead, Kingsley muttered an apology, and started to help him get the papers back. When this was done, the young man looked up to him, and winced. Everyone knew the Cleansing team and its director's ways. Still, the man wasn't yelling, just looking at him speculatively.

"You are a Weasley." This wasn't a question.

"Yes sir, Percival Weasley, 6th year in Hogwarts, here on a summer job, sir."

Kingsley reflected some more, hiding a smirk, before adding “I may have a job for you, if you are interested.”

“Anything, sir!” Percy bubbled happily, before remembering his current job and armload, and blushing.

Kingsley chuckled merrily. “It’s okay, son. We all know the tedious nature of these laws. You should ask your father about them.” At that, Percy’s head shot up, but Kingsley wasn’t paying attention. “Still, if you prefer to stay where you are...”

“No sir, I’m interested. What do you want me for?”

“Hmm... I’m rather busy today. Meet me tomorrow at 8am in my office.”

“Yes, sir!”

Northern London funfair...

Gabriel’s hair was growing. It had only been a month since he woke up in the dump, and his hair had grown a full inch from its burnt previous appearance. It was now in spikes all over the place. He just hoped that his hair would get long enough to hide his face someday. What was even more bizarre than his exceptional quick hair growth, was the fact that, when he was concentrating on them really hard, he could feel them growing. Of course, he hadn’t told this to anyone. Already singled out by his appearance, he didn’t want people to throw him back to the streets because he was a freak.

A freak.

How he hated this word! He didn’t know why, but he positively hated it.

Anyway, his job agreement with the woman was holding. He maintained the tracks, oiled the different parts, activated some of the non-automatic monsters, and participated himself.

He had almost got an accident once, when, while removing a fallen puppet monster from the tracks, a ride cart had nearly hit him. He still didn't know who had been the most frightened between him and the cart's occupants. Reflecting about that, he had admitted that his look wasn't very pleasant, especially in the ride's lights, and had decided that he could enhance the ride by playing a monster himself. After a brief discussion with the woman, he had tried, successfully, with and without accessories, and enjoyed himself immensely. His favourite display was without any accessory, using his normal clothes. Truth be told, his clothes were already appropriate for a vampire, and he began to like the gothic style. The kids, and sometimes adults, he frightened were doing the ride a good publicity, and there were more people than before. The randomness of his manifestations even made some people go through the ride several times in a row. All in all, the woman and he were making good money and he started to store a little bit of it.

On the rare times when he wasn't working in the ride, he was either selling tickets or trying to find the red-haired girl again, quest in which he hadn't got any success yet. He was working on the ride for most of the day, and she wasn't at her father's stall or in the park before or afterwards. He finished by deciding she had been a dream, but stayed where he was anyway, because he was enjoying himself.

When out of the ride, he always made sure to hide his face with his hair, and to dress with a hooded cape, thus keeping the surprise for the prospective horror show riders, and not attracting undue attention. When he was selling tickets, he had much free time, and started to draw. What were only indistinct figures at the beginning started to take form into a large castle, with animals around it. More specifically, snakes and birds. After a few days, the woman interrupted him, by appearing behind him and complimenting the drawing. However, when she started to ask about the bird's specie, he was unable to answer. Not one to reveal weaknesses like amnesia to anyone, he just shrugged it away. But this little part of his past was tugging at him. Castles, snakes, birds... the girl. Deep down, he knew there was a link, but he couldn't figure it out.

There were many bird species living in town, but none compared to the one he is drawing. He even saw an owl once, in broad daylight,

another strange occurrence, but when he signalled that to the woman, she didn't see it. Still, the owl was around the fair for most of that day. That evening, walking from the show to the mobile home with the woman, he felt something hitting the top of his head. It was a scrap of peach-coloured paper, appearing to have been scribbled onto, but so damp from the weather that only a few words were legible, and bits of paper seemed moulded away.

...one...

...you?...

...ny

Looking around to see if anyone was nearby to throw him debris, he was surprised to find no one. He forgot about the incident, and, talking with the woman, totally missed the white owl hooting in the sky.

The following day was beginning badly. First of all, he got a nightmare. A big one, where there was so much pain that he couldn't remember it. Then, the rain. Well, sometimes, you don't call it mere rain, but rather a downpour. So much water coming from the sky that the ride couldn't function properly and, even as properly covered as it was, would need a whole clean-up before running again. So much water also that there were no clients in the park at all. So much water finally that the electricity provided by the city was failing. No job, no heating, no light, nothing. It was that bad.

Still, it left time for a little chat with his employer and landlady. But he avoided most of the questions, not even knowing the answers himself. Misunderstanding him, and thinking that he just had some private secrets, as she herself did, she decided not to press the issue anymore. At least, not today. So, he continued to draw 'things' from his incomplete memory. The woman had bought him a sketchpad at one point, and he had made a good use of its pages. Among the variations of castles, snakes, and birds, he had also tried to draw the girl's face, but had failed miserably each time, too wrapped up in emotions to think correctly. Now he was more into drawing medieval weapons, especially swords. Why? He doesn't know. Like his other drawings, it came naturally to his mind. When the sky finally stopped

trying to drown the world, they came out, and went directly to the show.

On their way, they found themselves among a small crowd of other stall keepers going to inspect their businesses, and, to Gabriel's shock, the girl and her father were there. After two weeks, her hair was still fiery and so beautiful that his breath caught and he had to stop walking. This didn't go unnoticed by the woman who, looking back and forth between the two teenagers, smiled widely.

“So, Gabe, got hooked already?”

When he didn't answer, she muttered “obviously” and, by repeatedly tugging at his sleeve, finally woke him, and they went to their show. There was a little damage, but enough so that they had to clean the whole structure and couldn't run the ride that day. Oh well. The improved income thanks to Gabriel's presence had made sure that they wouldn't go bankrupt for at least a week of inaction. Still, it was annoying.

When they were finished, it was late afternoon. The woman asked him, with a twinkle in her eyes, if it bothered him that she invited some friends for dinner. Not catching the twinkle, he accepted and she left the counter, letting him close it.

Gabriel headed back to their mobile home, and was startled to hear chatter coming from it. ‘Obviously, she already invited her friends,’ he reflected. He entered the place, and found his landlady opposite the doorway, and a black-haired guy in front of her. The woman indicated the seat next to her, and, as he sat, he was shocked to find the face of the girl's father looking at him approvingly, apparently not deterred by his scarred appearance.

“So, Grace here told me you improved the train ride? Good, good. I'm not in shows myself, more like the guns, yes. I'm Michael, by the way.”

A mumbled “Nice to meet you” by Gabriel was met by a twin laugh from the two adults there, just when the door opens and a clear

feminine voice called “Dad, you put a note to find you at Grace’s, what’s the matter?”

Ashamed, and blushing, Gabriel looked up at his landlady, and when she answered with a raised eyebrow, he knew she was playing the matchmaker. Even if it felt good to be with the girl, he was very insecure about his appearance. In his job, it was an asset, but with girls...

Still, she didn’t seem impressed by the scars. She eyed him curiously first, taking him in, then naturally smiles, and held her hand. “Good evening. I’m Joan. And you are?”

At the girl’s natural vitality, he was quite lost, and couldn’t remember his name. He panicked and it was Grace that answers, with laughter in her voice. “Gabriel is quiet, but not mute, generally.”

Turning around, he shot his landlady a dark look, before sighing, collecting himself, and turning back again towards the girl. “I’m Gabriel. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.”

The ice being broken, they sat, and an agreeable discussion ensued. Even if he couldn’t remove his only working eye from her, she seemed not to mind, and even blushed sometimes. That was the best evening he could remember, and he couldn’t miss the pang of loneliness when the guests went home that night. Later...

The night was still, and Gabriel asked himself why he was awake. Sure, he was still excited about yesterday, and had had trouble finding his sleep. He now knew where the girl and her father lived, and she didn’t seem disgusted by his scars. They had even invited him and Grace for another dinner that week. So he was feeling good. But the feeling that woke him was as if, in this entire situation, something, or someone, was missing. Not being able to pinpoint what it was, was utterly frustrating. Going back to sleep, he decided that, even if he was missing something, he should enjoy the situation.

The next morning was better than the previous one, and the shining sun promised a beautiful day, thus successful concerning the ride.

Near midday, Gabriel had been doing the monster for some time, and was quite tired. At one point, he had got a fleeting remembrance of his past when a cart passed by, and, just before he scared the boy and his mom there, he had heard them speaking in shushed tone.

“Mom! It’s not even scary!”

“You wanted to go there, sonny.”

“Yes but these muggles are so...”

And that had been when he booed to them, effectively scaring them. After this one, he reflected about the fact that the term the boy used at one point had been known to him before, but he couldn’t remember it.

Then, a group of six older teens, around the age of eighteen, took the ride. Now, when people went to a horror train ride, it was either to enjoy a good scare, or to prove to themselves or others that they weren’t scared easily. These teens were of the latter sort, and they were answering every monster’s shouts with insults of their own and laughter. When Gabriel went to them, though, they jumped out of their skin and squealed in fright. These youth’s group wasn’t finished as a second and third carts followed, and he got them also.

Satisfied with himself, but a little tired from his morning’s activities, he did this for a few carts, before going out of the ride, signalling to Grace that he was going home. Unknown to him, the group of teens from earlier hadn’t been happy of being scared like little girls and were plotting against him, while smoking some unholy things. As they had to wait for a long time, they were a little stoned when he got out.

As Gabriel left, they followed, and, when he took a hidden shortcut between noisy stalls, they ran and threw him on the floor. Having two of them sitting on him was quite painful, and they added to his

discomfort by laughing and gloating. Then, one of them, obviously the leader, approached him. His skull-decorated cloth scarf started to remind something to Gabriel, but he hadn't time to ponder this, as the leader addressed him, shouting in his ear over the surrounding blare.

“So, scar-face, happy to scare people? We are going to give it back to you.” and he threw his foot on Gabriel's side, to his gang's shouts of “Show him, Johnny!” Soon, encouraged by the blaring music around them and the relative isolation of the alleyway, all six of them were landing kicks and punches on him. After a dispirited attempt to defend himself, only succeeding in angering them further, he collapsed under the assault and blacked out.  
Godric's Hollow's cemetery...

Heart-wracking sobs.

Angry shouts.

Casual conversation.

All this could be heard around the Potter's grave, but there was only one person present. Ginny Weasley was visiting the place, alone. After several nights having nightmares about him, she wanted to open up, at least to his grave. The previous nightmare had been crystal clear but, strangely, not related to the imagined house fire as usual. She had been in a noisy place where people seemed to enjoy themselves, and she had seen Harry being beaten by ruffians. She couldn't see his face, but she sensed it was him, and she had sprung awake in cold sweat, again. She was still denying Harry's death, still having feelings towards him, but the logic and mindset of the people around her was soaking her. That's why, between regular, if one-sided, chats with a tombstone, she also wept on it, and shouted at the outside world.

A hoot coming from the sky diverted her attention, and she looked up just in time to catch the white ball of feathers that she adopted some time ago.

Ginny got to the damp owl happily, searching for a missive. Finding none, she inspected Hedwig's talons and was distressed to find bits of damp peach-coloured paper, recognizing her own stationery colour. She stumbled in defeat. Harry had not been found, and Hedwig lost her message in the rain, trying to find him.  
St Virginia's hospital, room C17...

He stirred in his bed, slowly awakening.

"Hey you," a soft voice near his ear breathed.

He opened his eye, but the light was so intense that he had to close it immediately. After hearing a scuffle of curtains closing, he tried to open them again. In the darkened room, he noticed the petite frame of his red-headed friend Joan.

Rasping, he answered "Hey yourself."

She giggled, but her concerned eyes didn't leave him, and she looked worried.

"What is it?" he asked, too weak to even raise his head to look at himself. Trying to move his limbs though, he discovered that he couldn't, and panicked.

"Shh..." she said, "you'll heal quickly, the doctors are good, around here."

"I remember... a group of people... and they attacked me..."

"Yes, we saw them running out of the shortcut, guiltily I'd say, and dad pursued them, but they were too quick. I went in the alleyway to check if they broke something, and I found they broke... you."

Surprised to hear tears in her voice, he looked up, and reached to brush her tears away. His arm was awkward, due to the plaster cast. She whimpered at the touch, and he was surprised of her reaction. He was also discovering his cast and wondered what those white tubes were doing around various parts of his body. Looking intently at

his cast, he discovered that his three friends had signed on it, wishing him a quick recovery. He also remembered recent dreams, where he concentrated on techniques learnt from a book. A very important book. Still out of reach of his conscious mind, though.

While he was looking at his arm, though, the door opened, and a grave voice intoned, "Miss Freyr, I already told you not to stay too long. He's not scheduled to wake for at least a m..." the doctor who had been talking, was stopped in his tracks as, opening the curtains, he noticed Gabriel staring alternatively at him and his cast.

"Impossible," he muttered "he shouldn't be able to move his arm."

Smiling, as a part of him was proud to exceed the doctor's expectations, Gabriel wiggled his finger tentatively. The astonished doctor was debating with himself about something, before taking hold of the bed. He removed the brakes and pushed Gabriel's bed out of the room, with a last glance to Joan Freyr, telling her to wait, and that they wouldn't be long.

They went at the end of the aisle, where the radiography machines were, and Gabriel got scanned through all his wounds. The results astounded the doctor even more. Looking at Gabriel inquiringly, he asked "You don't have a twin do you? You didn't just switched places with a wounded boy that, by a miracle, would look exactly like you?"

"What do you mean, doctor? I remember being attacked, and waking in that room, that's all."

"Hmm..." the doctor didn't lose his stunned expression for a while, before shaking himself awake.

"You are fine. All your casts can be removed, except the one on your left leg, where you are still a little fragile. We had to break the bones again, because it was already badly bent. I gather you were limping before?" At Gabriel's nod, he smiled. "Well, after your recovery, you won't anymore. You healed surprisingly quickly, though, young man. You had several other fractures in your legs, ribs, and arms. I'd advise you to be careful with your leg for a week. If your

healing is that quick,” he continued, encompassing Gabriel’s body in a wave of his arm, “we will remove it then. Now, don’t move, as we remove these. Have you had casts before?”

At Gabriel’s head shaking ‘no’, he explained the concepts behind the cast saw, which couldn’t cut bones, and merely grazed the skin, while cutting in a cast efficiently. Gabriel understood, and he was a little less apprehensive and jumpy when cast after cast was removed from his body. As he was still a little feeble, having been inactive for the best part of a week, the doctor advised him to stay at the Hospital for a few hours.

Gabriel was smiling, when another dumbfounded nurse pushed his bed back in his room, where he found an anxiously waiting Joan. Happy to see him in such a good health, she squealed, and jumped in his arms, crying with relief.  
Back at the Ministry...

Percy was happier than the previous day. At one point in the evening, he had asked his father about Shacklebolt’s comment, and a blushing Arthur told him that he had started working for the Ministry in that particular department, and it had taken him three years to extricate himself from the laws and paperwork and ask for a better position. That had ended their mutual wariness on the subject, and they had spent a good part of the evening talking about laws on beings and beasts.

He got transferred directly with Shacklebolt’s secretaries’ office, and was assigned the job of sorting the most recent files. He quickly dispatched the one about the werewolf nest, from the month before, and got stuck with the next in the stack. The vampire case was still open, because Stuart Lengley was still missing. If nobody was to investigate, the file would stay open for a year, and take unnecessary space in the already confined office. True to the style of the office, which he appropriated quite quickly, he went to his superior.

“Sir?” Percy was still a little apprehensive of disturbing Kingsley’s activities like that. Kingsley, though, didn’t mind the slightest. At least now.

“Yes, Weasley?”

“I was sorting the vampire case, sir, and I was thinking that an investigation about Lengley’s whereabouts could help close the file. We don’t know, perhaps he’s dead like the others.”

“That would be a pity.” Kingsley Shacklebolt looked sad for a second, before continuing. “You’re right, though, but we don’t have enough resources to explore that avenue right now. Almost every Auror is on duty.”

The man was eyeing him appraisingly, and Percy gathered his courage to ask the next question. “I... I could help with that, sir.”

His superior’s surprise at hearing the question was only revealed by the raise of his right eyebrow, but, thinking about it, he could send the young man to question Nymphadora Tonks, who just woke from her injuries.

That’s how Percy got in St Mungo the very same day, to pry information from the newly awakened but still lying Auror. The afternoon was turning into a grey evening, and, after some difficulties understanding the problem at hand, he returned to his office to report.

“What do you mean, three?” Shacklebolt wasn’t a man to display bubbling feelings, but the young redhead still felt the underlying anger.

“That’s what she said, sir. They were three of them, and they remarked it even before the final confrontation, due to the vampire’s... sleeping arrangements. Unfortunately, the Contact was broken and they couldn’t ask for reinforcements. She also said that one of them was an elder, and the pictures of the place taken by the rescue team confirmed the coffins’ display.”

“An elder? The elder? Sweet Merlin!”

The chief of the Cleansing team of the Creatures department was still not displaying his anger, but his tone of voice was hard as steel when he tapped on his Comtact with his wand, barking a name.

“Weinard! My office! Now!”

A second after, a wizard in his twenties was apparating in the room, his clothes in disarray and his eyes halfway closed. It was unknown to Percy how someone could apparate in this state without splinching himself. Idly reflecting on this while Shackbolt’s anger was rising, he decided that it was certainly due to practise.

“Justin Weinard! How many coffins were there in the vampire’s hideout?”

Seeing his boss’ anger under the surface, the other man was waking, fast. “I... I don’t remember, sir. There were debris all around, and we had a deceased and especially two critically wounded Aurors to take care of. I don’t recall anything about coffins. I mean... I remember one, because it was on a remote dais, untouched by the fight, but that’s all.”

“A dais?”

“Yes sir, if I recall correctly, it was surrounded by artwork and rich carpets, like what we learnt about elder vamp...” The man’s eyes widened suddenly, the enormity of his responsibility crashing upon him.

“So, you noticed an elder vampire bedding, and just found useless to inform us? We have two deceased Aurors, one still in St Mungo, and a fourth has disappeared. I want to know the elder’s whereabouts, and I want to know it fast!”

Shackbolt tried to rein his anger. Sighing deeply, he showed Percy to Justin and intoned, in a dark tone, “Justin, you’ll work with Percy Weasley here. He’s here for a summer job, but his insight in this case has proven useful. He’ll be in charge, and you are to protect him during your travels outside.”

“Outside, sir?” Both young men stood aghast.

“Yes. You are to investigate the place, and find where he could have fled. Thank you, Percy, you have proven yourself valuable, and this won’t be ignored in your career, should you want to join us after Hogwarts.” Percy bristled with pleasure.

Turning towards the other young man, Kingsley Shacklebolt intoned gravely. “Justin, yours is hanging, here. Help Percy to your best and I may revise my opinion. You are both dismissed.”

Two young men stumbled out of Shacklebolt’s office, stunned, before deciding on a meeting place and time the next day.

The following morning, they arrived together at the shoddy building where three Aurors met their fate, and from which a fourth had disappeared. Using a few history-revealing spells taught by the Auror Academy to any future investigation squad, Justin told Percy how the battle took place and what the results were. Percy was writing all this in his large journal, for future reporting. Justin added that he and his colleagues were pressed when, called as a rescue team, they had to take care of the fallen before starting to reflect. Shivering, they both explored the beautifully decorated dais with the open coffin on it.

Open?

In broad daylight?

They looked towards each other as the same thought crossed their mind. Percy then wrote furiously while Justin walked around the mahogany coffin draped in purple silk. Justin also remarked the coffin’s size, inappropriate for a grown man. Exploring the coffin’s interior, and ripping its silken hangings apart, they also uncovered a stack of supposedly false identity papers, usable in several countries. Looking through the stack, they noticed that, contrarily to usual stacks of fake IDs found around thugs and ruffians, these don’t have the same picture. Different names, different pictures, different ages though always between 13 and 18.

Percy put the evidence in a special pocket of the jacket he got from Shackbolt. Not being an Auror, he didn't have the proper equipment to investigate a case like this. The jacket had many pockets, all covered by a conservation charm, making them the ideal place to store evidence. They then went outside, in search of witness of either the vampire or the Auror.

After several houses, Percy looked defeated. Justin knew this kind of neighbourhood from the missions he went through, but the area was just too trashy, physically and in the few inhabitants' mind, for Percy's mental health.

They decided to finish by walking around the area a last time, not bothering to enter houses anymore. And, beside the last strip of road, they noticed a pile of rubble and waste, where an object caught the sun's light and reflected it towards them. Holding their handkerchief to their noses to quell the stench, they went to check and, after digging for a second or two, they found a sword. All thoughts of leaving the area fled them immediately as they recognize an Auror's sword, personalized to Stuart Lengley. With the evidence in Justin's trembling hands, they searched the debris, but didn't find anything else. Disturbed as to why the Auror would get rid of his sword in such a place, they started to leave the area, when Percy's attention was drawn to a plastic bag lying on the floor. Contrarily to most of the stuff around them, the bag was quite clean, without dust and mud, and the like. Sensing his partner's hesitation, Justin turned over and also noticed the bag. Then he paled. There, written in black on the crisp white material, was one muggle word that every Auror knows. Forensic.

Some time afterwards, and a scourging charm from Justin on them both, two disgruntled young men entered the nearest forensics office. The wizards' culture rarely kept the dead in the open, preferring to bury them as quickly as possible. The reason behind this was that each body still contained a part of the magical power held by the deceased person. And that magic could be used by necromancers, either to fuel spells, and to create powerful undead servants. When buried, the body decomposition would happen faster, and the power still left in the body would dissipate harmlessly in the earth. Some

wizards and witches, whose main job was directed towards Nature, even thought that the magic power was initially given by the Nature and had to go back there. For them, besides being evil, necromancy was an antithesis of everything alive.

All these thoughts found their way in the young men's heads as they progressed through the corridors. They had showed a charmed badge to the receptionist and asked their way, and were now entering a room, covered in tiles. A whole wall of the room consisted of drawers, and Percy shuddered to think of their content. Working on one table, a man in green overalls was humming an unknown tune. And on the table was lying the very prone, and very naked, body of Stuart Lengley.

Shocked at the display, they gasped, and the man turned around, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Who are you?"

It took a moment for them to recover, not being used to see dead people on display, especially naked and in such a violent light. Before coming here, though, they had made up a story.

"Percival Lengley, it's my... my dad, over here."

The other man's eyes inspected him with distrust clearly showing. But the deceased's identification paper, though with a weird aspect, mentioned that his name was Stuart Lengley, and he had no way of disproving the young redhead's affirmation. Some information was missing, though, and he thought that he could fill the record by extracting data from this visibly shaken teen. His sadistic side was coming out, and these two shaken specimen of humankind would be perfect for his verbal prodding.

"So, as he's your dad, you must know his name, hmm?"

"Stuart Lengley, sir."

"How old is he?"

“Forty-five.”

“What’s his blood group?”

The question took both wizards by surprise. Both had been raised by wizards, and for any wound, they had potion. The notion of blood group was totally unknown to them. While Percy was dumbfounded and visibly racking his brain for a valid answer, the professional side of Justin took over, though, and he casually answered.

“We don’t know. It has been a while, and we never talked about this.”

“And who are you, pray tell?”

“Percy’s cousin. His dad worked as a freelance reporter and photographer, and the thrill of adventure didn’t cope well with a stable family, so he left them five years ago.”

That seemed to placate the older man, and, after a few other questions, with both guests answering, still sticking to the cover story, the worker let them take the corpse. Having a last look at his face before covering him up, they were startled to find no pain, nor anguish on the dead man’s face, but rather a smug expression of triumph, as if, while dying, he succeeded in achieving something of importance.

Something wasn’t clicking in the worker’s mind, though, and he decided to ask the question while they were leaving to fill in some paperwork. The visitors looking relieved, he thought that they wouldn’t guard their answers like they seemed to do before.

“Is it normal, for a reporter, to be stabbed in the heart?”

The silence that ensued was deafening. Percy’s face was displaying too many emotions, and Justin looked like a mouse cornered by a hungry cat, looking left and right. The doctor stood back, satisfied to have had them, and was ready to call for the receptionist, when

Justin took a wood stick from his pocket, and, directing towards the doctor, spoke, "Obliviate."

Some hours afterwards, the wizards pushed the levitating corpse of the deceased Auror into the Casualties division of the Ministry, with his personal belongings, consisting only of clothes. At one point in the muggles' forensics' office, they had taken them back. Among the clothes, though, was a sword, which they didn't put away with the body.

Their next stop was Kingsley Shacklebolt's office, for their report. It was going to be difficult, as they only had meagre hints, besides the obvious new corpse in the building. They only had the fact that the coffin had visibly not been used in days, the stack of fake IDs, and the sword they uncovered with Stuart's clothes.

It was a work of art, yet looked deadly at the same time. As blood-crusted as Stuart's sword, and of the same length. But there was something foreboding about the sword's decorations: all of it was death-oriented. The only thing they could infer from the sword was that Stuart had been fighting the vampire, and has been killed after inflicting a few wounds by himself.

Just before quitting the forensics office, they had asked a few questions under a spell, and found out that no other body was found around the dump, and no stack of clothes with ashes inside either. As it was, their only conclusion was that, either the vampire was hiding somewhere else, or he was dead, reduced to ashes by the sun, and somebody took the clothes. In this entire affair, everybody had totally disregarded the pile of grey and half-burnt rags that were thrown haphazardly in a shadowed part of the dump. After all, what wouldn't you expect to find in such a place?

Kingsley Shacklebolt was less angry about the whole affair now, perhaps because he had taken the time to calm himself, but mostly because of the guilty feeling that he shouldn't have sent young Percy almost on his own, in the muggle world, where he didn't have any experience. Still, they both managed to find clues and get Stuart's body back.

“So, to sum up our clues,” he took the report and another sheet of paper, enumerating “we have a bloodied Auror sword, another sword, presumably the vampire’s, an emptied coffin, no more noticeable vampire activity in the area,” he also had directed the investigation towards information-gathering front, “a stack a picture IDs for different teenagers, and...” his eyebrows shot up, and he looks at them “a smug expression on Stuart’s dead face?”

Looking between them, the two young men shifted uncomfortably, before Percy answered, “Yes, sir. Justin informed me about the usual faces people were having in death, enabling investigators to know what curse was used, and we found his face surprising. As if he had succeeded in doing something worth more than his life.”

The silence was awkward, but Kingsley was thoughtful. This bizarre clue could indicate that the dead Auror’s last action had been to kill the vampire, but they had no proof, apart from its apparent desertion. After a while, he took the clues and evidences, put them in a box, and, after labelling it ‘Urgent, Shacklebolt’, banished it to the Department of Mysteries. There were people there who were able to mix random clues and extract facts. He then looked up at the two young men, who, self-consciously, stood up at the ready.

“Okay, gentlemen. You did everything I asked. Justin, you can get back to your unit. Percy, I’ll write this in your file. You can go back to your desk; I think there are some files waiting.”

Both young men nodded, smiling, and, after exiting their superior’s office, shook hands before separating.

To be continued in next chapter: Books and Politics...

He lives, but none is able  
To get him, unreachable,  
Perhaps the hunt will do it?  
To find out, guys, review it.

## Chapter 10 – Books and Politics

In his reduced state, Gabriel was using crutches to move around Grace's mobile home, but couldn't very well act as a monster in the ride. Not to mention that it would be most dangerous. So, he was stranded home. Joan was with him most of the time, though. Both youngsters began to share their stories, most of them coming from the red-haired girl, though, because he didn't have that many memories. Still, recounting the diverse reactions of people he scared was funny.

The very evening he went home, Grace had invited the Freyrs again, to Gabriel's delight, and she had told him that he should read a book or two, to pass time. Joan and he had decided to go to the nearby bookstore the next day. He still wasn't comfortable using crutches, and didn't want to ride downtown. The same evening, Michael, having a stand of target shooting, had also suggested that Gabriel should distract himself with some gun practise. He could perhaps, he added sombrely, buy one later and defend himself against these ruffians.

The next morning saw Joan and a wobbling Gabriel nearing the local bookstore. As soon as they entered, the door closing behind them, Gabriel was taken by the serious atmosphere. The place was very dark, with dust hanging in the air, and very few children books around. Closing his eye, he seemed to remember a place like this. No, he reflected, more than one place, and he liked to go there with his friends.

Friends.

Who were they?

Disturbed at his jumbled mind state, he advanced towards the shelves, only to go back immediately, in fear the sturdy and visibly heavy furniture may fall down on him. Then he rationalized. Why would he be afraid of furniture that seemed to be there from the beginning of time? Doubt tainting his features, he advanced towards the furthest set shelf, not aware that his every reactions were watched by Joan, while she followed him silently.

‘He’s pretty beneath his scared face,’ she thought, ‘I wonder how he looked like before. And his insecurity is so cute. But I saw how he’s strong inside, and how he looks at my hair. Boyfriend material?’

Oblivious to her, Gabriel pushed himself towards the distant shelves, and, upon arriving there, looked at the books in wonder. These books appeared positively ancient! Why would he concern himself with them?

Why, indeed?

He looked around, noticing Joan’s close by, looking at a nearby shelf; and the old shopkeeper, seemingly reading a novel.

He turned back towards the antique books and, not understanding their presence in a regular bookstore and not a museum. Frowning, he concentrated on the books’ aspect, and especially titles. “Dancing with trolls.” “The 1,001 uses of the snake’s skin.” “Potions for the dumb.” All these titles were really weird. Taking one for closer inspection, he was surprised by two things. Firstly, the book didn’t appear as old in his hands as it was on the shelf. Secondly, the shopkeeper, a wizened old man, had silently appeared right beside him, eliciting a surprised yelp from Joan. His raspy voice asked, “How may I be of service, lad?”

Suspecting that the man didn’t want mere kids to touch his precious aged books, he fumbled to put the book back in the shelf, before answering. “No... I mean... Thank you, sir, we... I was just browsing.”

“Beware of some of these books, lad. When improperly handled, their content may harm you.” The old man’s eyes were boring into his, and he couldn’t find his voice for a moment. Moreover, the old man’s strange choice of words was tugging at lost memories again, and Gabriel was at a lost about the shopkeeper, the books, and especially himself.

Shaking his head, he finally answered, “thank you sir, I’ll... I’ll be careful.”

“Good.” and the man went back to his desk, the floor creaking on each of his step. ‘How did he appear so suddenly and noiselessly?’ wondered Harry, before turning back to Joan.

She had been following him, but couldn’t concentrate on the antique books he was looking at. She really had no need of these, she thought, and went the next shelf, picked a random book, and had started browsing it. When the old man had appeared next to Gabriel, it had seemed to her that he did just that, appear from thin air right next to Gabriel. Shaking her head, she went back to the book she was holding, about garden plantations and how to grow record-breaking pumpkins, and quickly dismissed the whole incident, attributing it to the confined room of the bookstore.

Why was she reading anything about garden plantations, anyway? She was following Gabriel, and...

Gabriel?

He wasn’t in front of the shelf of old books anymore. Turning wildly, she was startled, but happy, to find him right behind her. He had also picked a small random book from the shelf, and he was frowning to decipher it. Glancing at the title, she chuckled silently, before whispering to him. “Gabe, are you really interested in ‘puzzles to boggle your mind’?”

“Hmm, hmmm...” he answered absent-mindedly.

“Gabe?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, if you are to continue answering like this, I may leave you all alone...” she answered, half-seducing, half-pouting.

“Hmm... what?”

“Nice to see you alert once more.” she said, sarcastically. “If you like this book that much, pick it up already.”

“Errm... I’m not... was I...”

“You were so absorbed that I could have danced naked in front of you and you wouldn’t have noticed me!”

“Errm...” he was blushing now, “did you?”

“No! You prat!” the exclamation and the following slap on the arm earned them a disapproving look from the shopkeeper. Lower, she added “Buy this book and off we go. I don’t like this place anyways. Next time, promise me we’ll go to London proper?”

“What? Ah, okay, okay...”

And he went to buy the book. While counting his money for it, the aged shopkeeper asked “What are you doing with it, lad?”

“Well... I like the... challenges? And,” he continued, pointing to his leg and crutches, “it’s not like I’m up to physical ones at the moment.”

The man was holding a crooked smile at that, and, after a time reflecting about it, answered “Well, if you finish all the puzzles, I may have something else for you. How’s that for a challenge, heh?”

Gabriel smiled too, just before exiting the store. “I’d like to. Goodbye, sir.”

“Bye, son.” muttered the wizened man after the couple’s departure. Then, slowly returning to the shelf with these aged books, he muttered again “On the only day in half a century that one of them shows himself and ask to browse these, I forget to hide it afterwards. And the boy went straight to them. Weird that, given his broken leg healing the muggle way... I wonder...” the rest of the old man’s monologue became internal as he removed a particular book, and then pressed a hidden button, and the shelf containing the old books vanished into the wall.

The teen's return to the mobile homes was thoughtful, each stealing glances at the other. Only once he deposited his book in 'his' home, did they speak again.

"I have to help dad with the stall. I suppose we can eat together around midday."

"I'd love too, J. I will replace Grace, and I'll fetch you afterwards."

"J?"

"Yes, I think it's you." he said dreamily, passing his hand on her hair. The name had come naturally, and it felt good on his tongue.

Smiling, she answered, while guiding him towards the stands, "You know, you're the first to dub me with that name. Some people called me Joan of Arch, or Jean... some French tourists even called me Yellow! But 'J'..." she looked at him, and then smiled. "I like that! Bye!" Having arrived at the separation point between their respective shops, she went to her toes, and kissed him lightly on the cheek, before leaving. For her, the physical sensation wasn't very pleasant, because of his numerous scars, but the emotional one was exhilarating. Gabriel, however, was overwhelmed.

Not able to move or even think coherently for a few minutes, the young man stood there, a hand holding his cheek and a goofy smile plastered on his face, before shaking himself awake, and moving towards the horror train ride show. He was not even conscious of the spring in his step, unhindered by the crutches.

Some time later, a gloomy teen was sulking internally, while displaying his best smile. He had been left in charge of the booth, for the rest of the morning, and client after client, almost everyone was afraid of his appearance first, then either laughed in discomfort, or, for those of them who recognized him from inside the ride, wanted to take pictures or shake hands. His popularity was rising but he didn't want to be remembered in his life as a freak.

That word, again, summoning dark memories from his subconscious.

A curtain, quick as lightning and hard as reinforced steel, fell down between his conscious mind and the remembrance. Whatever his earlier memories were, he sighed, they weren't beautiful. Still, he couldn't repress a pang of regret about not knowing his past.

That afternoon, after a good-heartedly eaten meal with Joan, he went with her to her father's stall, and, enjoying a moment of calmness while clients were digesting, she showed him how to use the air rifles. All in all, they had a great time together.  
At the Ministry main meeting room...

"...so, you see. We are undertaking a large change from Cornelius, and we want to do it the right and legal way. We are going to hold elections for the Ministry, and, as much as I want all this to proceed smoothly, I also want to continue with my work in this office. What I propose is that you take the position while the elections process unfolds itself, and you'll pass it to the newly appointed Minister just before starting Hogwarts again. What do you say?"

The wizard, known as the most powerful of this time, was hunched on his cane, and reflecting about Amelia's proposition. Albus Dumbledore wasn't sure to be able to manage the Ministry, the upcoming Hogwarts starting term, and his regular sessions with the Wizengamot, among other responsibilities. He turned towards his Deputy Headmistress, the Transfiguration Professor McGonagall. She merely looked back and nodded, once, thus silently accepting the full burden of responsibilities and work from the Headmaster. They had spent so much time together that they could communicate only with a slight gesture. That was a level of communication generally shared by twins or long-married couples, even if those two weren't engaged in anything remotely intimate.

"I accept. Who's going to run for the office?"

"Myself," Amelia started, "and Arthur," at which Arthur Weasley rose on his feet. "That's all for the moment. Once we announce the elections, though, I'm sure that we'll have more opponents."

The following days were hectic, as people learnt the replacement of Amelia Bones by Albus Dumbledore, so that she could run for the position, legally. And, as Amelia predicted, two more contestants joined the fray. The first wasn't a big fish, as Friedrich Humbert seemed to be a rich and obscure entrepreneur who made most of his fortune abroad, and wasn't known by the public. The last, though, surprised everyone, especially those that were so close to Harry that they knew about his romp to Malfoy Manor. Lucius Malfoy was back. At the Burrow...

Usually, the summers were spent sending and receiving owls, and visiting friends, generally having a good time. That summer at the Burrow, though, was as sad as one could be without actually losing one of their family members. Well, in fact, even if Harry wasn't technically a family member, they had more or less adopted him. With Molly supporting Arthur, who, with Percy, was working at the Ministry, the kids were left more or less alone. Even more so when their friends left them most of the time as well. While their friends knew the reason behind their silence, it wasn't comfortable for them either.

Some of them took drastic measures. On the first week of the vacation, Hermione had been dragged by Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown into a shopping spree into muggle London's clothing shops. Although she had been reluctant at first, grumbling about the lost study time, she finally enjoyed herself. Especially when, trying dresses in a muggle shop, and, following her friends' advices, she dressed sexily for the first time ever. That sure caught the eyes of the few males in the shop, and the three young witches fled the premises, all giggling. It wasn't the best memory of Hermione's, but that was close.

Bill Weasley, the oldest brother of the brood, took pity of the sombre mood of the Fred and George and invited them in Egypt with him. He even brought them to his job a few times. The twins seemed to love the trip and the sights, but, unbeknownst to Bill, what the twins liked most was watching him doing his dangerous job of curse-breaking. They even borrowed some text books about location curses and their breaking. To appear innocent, they chose only two, among with plenty of tourist books and muggle novels concerning Egypt. All this

went in front of Bill's eyes, but he was so happy to see his brothers smile again that he didn't give a second thought about their sudden interest in deadly curses.

For their part, the other boys of Ron and Harry's dormitory plotted together to drag Ron out of the Burrow, where he was merely living, oblivious of the passing of time. Ron was also speaking out of context all the time, and it unnerved everyone. Especially Ginny, who couldn't refrain from thinking about Luna each and every time he did that. Strangely, some remarks from Ron weren't as much out of context as they seemed first, and some of them even appeared clear long after he uttered them. These times, it was as if Ron was living in the future, and it was scary.

So, as Neville was on a trip in Africa with his grandmother, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan took upon themselves to bring some smile on Ron's face. Ron being somewhat unresponsive, it was Ginny that answered the fire-call. When she did, Dean and Thomas invited her at the same time, and they all decided to meet at Dean's house the following week, for a day of fun. Ginny hoped that it would work, as she had never seen Ron so impassive for such a long time. She even suspected some long-term effect. At the ministry, six days later...

Everybody in the room was upset. Arthur Weasley was upset, Amelia Bones was upset, even Albus Dumbledore was upset. They had been had, royally.

In the previous week, they had arranged for every witch and wizard of age and living in Britain to receive a charmed scroll on which people could vote. That has been the way of voting for centuries, and the scrolls were charmed so that they couldn't be intercepted, nor read behind one's back. The person's name was already on it, and only this person could check the box near the chosen name. This couldn't have been the problem.

The campaigning had gone relatively fairly, each of them being allowed equal time and space in the media. So, with the ideas proposed by each of the candidates, people could have identified

themselves quite easily. Even Malfoy was blameless, as he politely greeted each and every person coming his way.

But Albus, Amelia, and Arthur knew that something was amiss. The people couldn't have voted freely for Lucius Malfoy. Not with more than 75 of the votes!

Unknown to them, the plan upheld by Lucius Malfoy was threefold. The first part was to ingrain some doubts about the other candidates, through the regular media. But this was fair game, and everybody did it. It was putting salt in the throat of honest candidates, but they wanted to hold elections the normal way, before Albus Dumbledore was too tired and retire.

The second part of Malfoy's campaign had been a 'personal' letter sent to most wizards and witches, except those known for their affiliation to, or spying for, Dumbledore. The letter explained in much more details the real program of Lucius Malfoy. It couldn't be displayed in the press because it was so harsh, so spiteful, and so unlawful even, that he would have been shot down immediately if it was displayed on a public media. So, the reporters didn't receive that letter either, nor the ministry employees. All in all, a rough eighty percent of the wizarding population of Britain received it. The letter underlined the current security problems, and linking them to the way the Ministry worked as a corrupt and powerless administration. Lucius literally wrote that the future Minister would have all power to do as he pleased in any regards, but, drowning this in fake facts and real reports of violence, it got the people fearful to vote for any other candidate.

The third part of the plan, reinforcing the second, was to schedule several Death Eaters attacks around the place where the largest number of witches and wizards lived. Not particularly deadly, these attacks were made only to scare. And they succeeded. Lucius also openly admitted that Voldemort had reappeared and killed his son. That got him the sympathy of the people, and the deal was closed. 78 of the voting population gave their voice to Lucius Malfoy for Minister, whereas only 10 chose Arthur Weasley, and 9 voted for Amelia Bones. Following such score, the man threw a party at his Manor to

celebrate his victory. Albus Dumbledore was to pass the reins the next day at noon, and it was already two in the afternoon.

The voters who had received the letter knew that, should Malfoy execute his program to the letter, all the creatures dubbed as “sub-specie” would be visibly identified and sent to work camps. Now, that didn’t disturb the regular politically blind person, because they all thought that it referred only to dangerous creatures. As always, everything was good as soon as each voter was unconcerned. However, they didn’t know that Malfoy, and Voldemort behind him, would extend the definition of “sub-specie” as soon as he would be seated in the Minister seat. Natural werewolves would be freed to cause rampage to the muggles, and most of the bitten ones would be grouped in camps surrounded in silver-coated barbed wire. All half-bloods would be grouped, marked as such, and denied any right. Only the “pureblood” ones would remain.

Albus Dumbledore finally got hold of the letter, and, coupled with the attack reports, which also undermined the Ministry’s resources and Amelia Bones’ time, it gave him a feeling of dread. On the sideline of all that agitation, something was disturbing Dumbledore even more than Malfoy’s success, something vital, but he couldn’t pinpoint it. In the current state of the political sphere, he was like a puppet in a tornado, thrown in all directions, and couldn’t even get a minute of rest. So he called for one of his friends, one in which he had deposited such trust so many years ago, and one that had stayed faithfully to his side. One who would be able to enter his tired mind and sort the disturbance before it was too late. One Severus Snape. Same time, around the funfair...

A week had passed, and the hospital removed the cast after the same doctor, accompanied by some older ones, commented on his quick recovery. He was asked many questions, and answered as truthfully as he could, but was rapidly seeing that they still were frustrated from not knowing how he healed himself so fast.

He left the place rapidly, on his two working legs, before going straight to the bookstore. In the course of the week, his forced semi-inactivity had pushed him to finish the coding/decoding puzzles quite

quickly. Most of them were variations of substitution and replacement codes, already well-known by the time of ancient Greeks and Romans.

As Joan was holding her dad's stall, Michael himself having a last-minute appointment at the bank, he was alone when he pushed the door of the bookworm paradise. The first thing he remarked was that the "antiques" shelf had disappeared, replaced by a wall, seemingly as old as the others around it. It was as if the shelf had never been there. He didn't even remember it clearly, it was like it has been a dream, including the shopkeeper's sly appearance. The other change was the shopkeeper himself. Well... herself. Instead of a wizened man clicking his cane on the floor, a plump woman in her sixties, clad in shades of purple with a black scarf, was up on a ladder, busily moving books around and dusting the place, causing much coughing and sneezing.

"Err... Pardon me?" Gabriel wasn't even sure to be in the same store as before.

The woman looked from the top of her ladder, and, seeing that she had a customer waiting, went down quickly. "Yes, young man? What can I do for you?"

Refraining from asking the question about the disappeared shelf first, because he doesn't want to be seen as a...

freak

...mad person and kicked out, Gabriel asked about the old man first. Looking stricken, the woman answered that her father fell from a ladder in the previous week, and that his neck had been cracked. Gabriel now understood better the red-rimmed eyes of the woman, and he could only mutter a usual sentence at this circumstance.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, young man. It's not your fault."

“I know. Still, even if I met him only once, he appeared to be... interesting.”

“Interesting, you can say that...”

A silence ensued, before, having a flash of memory, Gabriel spoke again. “A friend of mine told me, once, that death is but the next adventure.” missing the sharp look from the woman, he continued. “I don’t remember him though.”

“Strange, because that was what used to say one of his friends, a very old man. He died some time ago, though, a year or two, as I recall.”

Another pause, while they collected themselves.

“Now, what has the old codger done to you for you to remember him?” she asked with a crooked smile, not unlike her father’s. He started to speak about the book he has bought the previous week, and the old man’s promise to show him another one. That did put her in a thinking mode, and she went under the counter, noisily rummaging through piles of unseen stuff. A shout after, her head turned back up and she was holding a thick envelope. She read the message on the envelope, and Gabriel immediately understood that he had been awaited for. It made him sad about the old man for a moment. For the special lad who successfully ‘boggled his mind with puzzles.’

He started to rummage for his remaining money, hoping that he had enough, when the woman’s hand catches his and she frowned.

“No, no. My father did put this envelope here, without any price tag on it. I consider it like one of his last actions. Let me give it to you, for free.”

Impressed by the intensity of her voice, he accepted the package, politely nodding, but he added, “If I’m not going to pay for it, then I’m going to do something about it anyway. Let me help you sorting the books, for instance. It would help you, before the whole back-to-

school rush, wouldn't it?" She was stunned. "I can be here for an hour a day, so, what do you think about my help," he glanced at the timetable on the door, "from 8 to 9 in the morning, say?"

The woman was looking at him, open-mouthed. His way of graciously accepting the gift and at the same time refusing its lowered price was almost otherworldly. Still, she nodded, and, smiling, asked for his name.

"Gabriel, madam. Gabriel Swift."

"I'm Mathilda Marshall, and my late father was Geoff Fisher. He lived so old that we all thought he was immortal. Oh the irony of it all. Perhaps, one day I'll lend you his Memoirs to read, they are most instructive." She looked sad, and at the same time, anxious that she may have told him too much for his own good. But Gabriel was already looking in the package, curious. There seemed to be a book, inside.

"Take it off, it won't bite." Gabriel's laugh at that was cut short as he remembered the old man telling him something like that a week ago. Still, he removed the book, and, glancing at the title, understood that he'll have to 'boggle his mind' some more. In his hands rested a dusty copy of 'cryptography principles – the theory behind secrets and codes'.

After a minute of staring at the book, he collected himself and took his leave of the plump woman, the vanished shelf forgotten. Dean Thomas' living room, the next morning...

"Ouch, Ron, can't you look where you land?"

"Hmm hmmm..."

Ginny sighed exasperatedly, as she and her brother disentangled from the heap they made while arriving through the Floo.

Smiling, Dean helped his dorm mate and his sister up, before Ginny brushed herself and her brother from the stray ashes. Dean and Seamus had carefully planned the day, and all fun muggles activities were going to be thrown at them. Seamus was doubtful that a soccer match in the afternoon would get a smile through Ron's face, or even if Ron could play at all, but he was going to follow Dean's instincts. In these cases, better be united.

The first stop of the day was the movies. Dean had bought them tickets for a morning presentation of a comical show. Even if the Weasley never saw a film before, they laughed through it. Well, Ron didn't laugh outright but smiled nonetheless. Dean was pleased by the little success, and proceeded with the plan, directing them out of the theatre to grab a piece of fast food. They laughed there also, when Ginny and Ron tried to understand the concept of eating without cutlery or dishes.

Afterwards, they took the underground to downtown London, and walked through the local sights. "To digest, it's important", Dean said with a mischievous smile. After two hours of sightseeing and relaxing, they went in the underground again, and, after a few laughs and almost losing Ron in a departing wagon, they went out of another station.

The noise of people screaming alerted them immediately, and Ginny searched frantically for her missing wand. When Dean and Seamus didn't react, apart from throwing her amused glances, she followed them outside, and understood. The screaming was coming from kids having a grand time being propelled in the air in several ways.

They had entered the funfair.

When she was sure that they didn't risk their physical health, Ginny tugged at Ron and they followed Dean and Seamus, as they explained the different shows. At one point, though, Ron reacted to something. Or rather someone.

"Ginny," he uttered, looking straight in front of him.

For the others, it was as if the outside world had been shushed. "What?" she asked.

Turning towards her, Ron appeared surprised, and asked "Ginny?"

She was annoyed at his lack of discussion, and snapped at him. "Yes, what?"

Not answering, he turned back towards the show in front of them, and pointed, saying "and Ginny."

Following his direction, his sister and friends couldn't believe their eyes. There, in front of them was another Ginny Weasley! Well, not exactly, as they discovered, approaching the stall, but close enough to be troubled by the similarity. The red-haired girl was vivaciously promoting her show, and pointing the targets and prizes to the kids who were playing at the moment, so she didn't notice them arriving and leaving.

Yes, they left, but not because they wanted to. They had to catch up with Ron, who had been walking away since they gawked at Ginny look-alike. When the long-legged redhead finally stopped, they were in the queue of another show, the "Dr Jekyll's horror train ride" which booth was held, as always, by Grace. When their turn arrived, Seamus paid for them all, still curious about why Ron would want to go there precisely. When Ginny passed the booth, her seat already paid, she didn't notice the stare the owner cast her. With a fatalism inherited from her Romanian ancestors, Grace let them pass without another glance.

The kids in the queue had been excitedly speaking about a new and really scary random monster, and that got Dean and Seamus excited as well. Oddly, Ron took Ginny's hand and they went first, Ron ignoring the curious looks from his old friends. And, as soon as the cart took off, he uttered a weak "weeeeee" as if he was screaming in joy, with the volume turned down.

The ride was making them going in a circle so that, most of the time, a cart's occupants weren't able to see the monsters ahead. Generally, Gabriel was hiding in the latest part, with the fake vampires and

ghosts, and was jumping on the unsuspecting cart, making it swerve, before touching its occupants or boo-ing in their ear. When he jumped on the cart and rounded it to scare the kids there, he froze suddenly. He was looking straight at the smiling face of Ginny Weasley.

Ginny has been discovering what muggles used to get voluntarily afraid and, as all that stuff was common knowledge in the magical world, she was merely smiling amusedly. When the cart swerved, she was a little apprehensive, and when a scarred face looked directly into her eyes, her mind went blank.

Wise people say that the eyes are a window on the soul. Even if she hadn't known that, even if his eyes had changed, and even with the hideous scars, Ginny knew the soul in front of her. And he knew her, too, she reckoned. As they looked in each other's eyes, his right and only working one was changing colour, slowly and unconsciously turning towards the vibrant green she knew. But he didn't have time to complete the change. He didn't even have time to try to utter the beginning of her name.

Even if they could have stayed a very long time like this, motionless, the cart itself was advancing inexorably. They were totally oblivious about the approaching one-way exit doors, and, as he wasn't inside the safety of the car, he got hit by the mechanism. Falling behind the cart, he rebounded on the tracks, and collapsed on the side, unconscious, not even hearing the deafening scream from outside the now closed black doors.

“HARRY!”

To be continued in next chapter: Research and Development...

Oh, my! The angst of it all!  
Will they meet normal at all?  
To ease the small cliffhanger,  
Review, it'll quench your hunger.

## Chapter 11 – Research and Development

“Mum! Dad!”

The bushy and unkempt mane of Hermione Granger appeared in the kitchen lit by the evening sun. Her eyes, while barely visible, were alit with a fever they hadn't seen there recently. Hermione Granger had made a discovery by herself. Judging by the sheer amount of books that she read, especially this summer, that has to be a groundbreaking one. Books were everywhere. The most important ones, which content and danger level were similar to the ones in Hogwarts' Library Restricted Section, were in her room. But others also littered the living room, the kitchen even had a few tomes scattered on the table, some were stored in the garage, and even their own bedroom had a shelf with her old muggle books. The Grangers generally doted on their usually calm and collected only girl, but they had felt pushed to stay home instead of going abroad, and to switch to a smaller car, to provide her with the more and more expensive tomes she needed. These books they bought were not even the only ones she read. She had an agreement with her Head of House to borrow books from Hogwarts' Library during summer. When Minerva McGonagall had told her this at Harry's burial, smiling at the face of the happy teenager, she hadn't considered that it was the same as removing speed limits and putting a kid her age in a sport car.

Hermione Granger was in grave danger of overburn. She seldom ate anymore, and only at her desk, and she rarely slept. The rare discussions her parents tried to have with her had been uneasy and generally cut short because she always left the room or buried herself in a book, not paying attention to her surroundings.

Her shopping spree, on the beginning of the summer, had been the only really happy memory recently. The logic part of her mind was working during the day but, at nights, she was plagued with emotional nightmares, ranging from Harry's death in an inferno to her friends Ron and Ginny pointing to her and blankly declaring that it was her fault, because she hadn't studied enough, and that she wasn't worth their friendship. She couldn't cope with these, so, on top of working to the brink of exhaustion during the day, she couldn't sleep for more

that two hours in one go. Needless to say, her parents were not happy anymore about their daughter's dedication, rather very worried and afraid.

That's in this condition that she thrown herself to her mom's and dad's necks, crushing them into the bear hug she had practised with Harry and Ron. She opened her mouth to tell them something, supposedly trying to explain her new discovery, but her face went slack, eyes overturned until showing their whites, and she collapsed. Jane Granger immediately crouched next the crumpled form of her daughter and, after trying to wake her unsuccessfully, they carried her to the living room, where they deposited her in the couch. Then, they retrieved the Notifier, a device furnished by the school to each muggleborn family in case of an emergency. Looking at each other's apprehensive eyes, then at the prone form of their daughter, they silently pressed the button together.

That button activated an observation mechanism in Hogwarts, precisely in McGonagall's new office; that is, the Headmaster suite. And, as luck would have it, she was still up and about, signing miscellaneous forms and reports. Frowning at the device, she inspected its output and noticed the familiar name on it. Rising in alarm, she prepared herself to go there, but, looking back towards the desk, noticed the huge workload. At the same moment, a knock was heard on the door, and Severus Snape entered the room.

"Minerva."

"Severus."

A silence.

"Well, Severus, if you wanted to tell me a bedtime story, I'd have agreed, but I'm taken with that stuff, and I've just been called for an emergency."

"Well, I had to discuss with you, as Headmistress, about Lucius' proclaimed death of young Draco, but that can wait. If you are asked..."

He started towards the door, when his colleague called him back. "Actually, Severus, you know I'm deep into this," she waved at her desk, "and I wondered if you had some time to assist me."

"Assist you?"

"As temporary Deputy Headmaster, until Albus comes back."

A pause, then the Potion Master answered. "I'd like to, but not in the open. And, being also Hogwarts' Potion Master and Professor, I have very little time. I also happen to have some... external activities... that you know of, naturally."

"Naturally." Being Deputy Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall had been allowed in the very small circle of people knowing the spying activity of Severus Snape concerning Voldemort. "If you have some time right now, I received a call from the Grangers' Notifier."

Snape's eyebrows rose and, after reflecting for a moment, he nodded and apparated away. Satisfied of her new Deputy Headmaster, but sighing at her remaining work, the Headmistress-in-interim went back to the desk and took the ornate quill back in hand.

Severus Snape, upon arriving in the Grangers' living room, looked around with his wand raised, in case the Notifier was used because of an attack. Looking down towards the occupied couch, he was struck to see the two distressed parents holding the unconscious, pale, and emaciated body of their daughter.

"I'm Professor Snape," he says, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from Mrs Granger. "What happened?"

While they recounted their daughter's frenzy, Snape cast some Healer basic diagnostics spells. The result made him frown, but he wasn't a Healer himself, and she had to see one as soon as possible. He was surprised, though, at the length someone would go to study more. As a researcher himself, if he had had the time, he would have

explored her room and her current research topics and ideas, but it wasn't the most important now, and it was also not very polite.

"I'm sorry," he announced, "but she's so weak that I'll have to bring her to the hospital. I'll be back in an hour to explain more."

Acknowledging the Grangers' distressed acceptance, he grabbed the prone form of Hermione and, knowing that the fireplace was connected to the Floo network, threw some Floo powder in it while uttering "St Mungo!"

As he entered the green flames, he couldn't see the frightened look that the Grangers threw to each other.  
At the same time, in a dark mansion...

Two figures could be seen in the darkened room. One was portly, even if his face was ashen and his eyes crimson, and the other was blond and tall, and kneeling in front of the first.

"Now rise, and meet your destiny!"

The blond one rose to his feet, his face blank, before the other continued.

"You are to meet the others at your father's Manor, and proceed as I told you."

"Yes, master. Thank you, master."

"Go now."

And the blond left. A short time afterwards, a hidden black-haired woman left the shadows, and the man's shrill laugh echoed in the room.

"You've done well, Narcissa. Our young Draco is very... mature, now."  
One hour and a half later...

She had told them about her friends. She had told them about her school. And she had told them about her professors. That's why they knew that something very bad had happened. Severus Snape was late. They had already decided to cancel their appointments for the next day, hoping to visit her and also that her condition wasn't so bad that she'd require a long stay at the hospital. When they heard the distinctive pop of a wizard magically appearing in their living room again, they jumped on their feet and practically drowned the person under questions, until they notice that it wasn't the black-clad Potion Master. It was a person in a white gown, like generally used in hospitals, and St Mungo was having the same traditions than the muggle hospitals in that respect.

“What happened?”

“Where is she?”

“Who are you?”

“Where is the Poison Professor?”

Smiling a little at the wrong qualification given to Severus Snape, the witch presented herself as Marge Hopkins, and tried to explain the situation to the distraught parents. It appeared that St Mungo was largely understaffed at the moment, and several persons arrived at the same time. The potion supplies being low, they had to ask him to prepare a few batch. Then he got called by a Ministry agent to solve other problems. Being the most qualified Potion Master around, he was queried by many and didn't have time to answer to all. But the Grangers could go there to visit their daughter, and that was almost all that was important. The witch handed them a staff, and asked to take a firm hold on it. As soon as that was done, she spoke the activation word and they portkeyed to St Mungo.

Upon arriving there, though, the witch got serious and they took each other's hand while she pushed them in an isolated room. There, she started to explain that Hermione seemed to have depleted not only her physical resources, but her magical ones, too. She had really

been close to death and, until she refilled herself in both, she wasn't to leave the place. Seeing their stunned faces, she explained that when people weren't eating or sleeping, as it was apparent Hermione did, their physical resources were lowered, but the person could stay alive for a long time, living on their magical reserve. As it appeared, Hermione must have had a large one, but too much exhaustion took away most of it. And it couldn't be healed by magical ways. She had to wait for it to refill naturally, avoiding magic as much as possible.

Her face darkening, Marge also asked if Hermione knew some people named Harry and Ron. While intrigued about the relation between her face and the question, the Grangers explained the circumstances to her, and she nodded. It also appeared that, when asleep or even unconscious, she was having strong nightmares about them. That caused several problems, the foremost being that, as Hermione hadn't had a proper night's sleep for a long time, her subconscious appeared damaged, and the nightmares were now preventing her proper recovery. Unless they gave her a large amount of Dreamless Sleep Draught, she wouldn't be able to heal. They had to ask the Grangers' approval because, given the dose Hermione needed, she was going to be addicted to it after her full recovery.

The Grangers didn't know anything about magical diseases and addictions, but, after confirming they didn't have any choice, they accepted and signed the form, tears flowing freely on both their faces and on the paper.

The same evening, the Minister's office...

"Ah, good evening, my friend."

Seeing the tired frame of Albus Dumbledore, Severus decided to forego an explanation of Hermione's state, and answered "As good as it gets, Headmaster. Or should I call you Minister?"

"Well, you know the election results? I'm going to be back to Headmaster status soon, you know. Perhaps even less, if Lucius has his ways. Tomorrow is going to be a bad day. You know Lucius,

Severus, and the semi-official program he sent to everyone isn't gentle at all."

"What do you need of me?"

"Straight to the point, as always, Severus. When you'll be older, you'll notice that sometimes, merely speaking about things can achieve great goals." He shuddered, and gathered himself. "Still, you are right. We don't have much time, and I need your help desperately."

"Desperately, Headmaster?" Snape, after so many years of calling Albus Dumbledore that way, wasn't to change that quickly, especially as the switch was temporary.

"I have had no time to sort my memories recently, Severus, and something annoys me concerning Malfoy. I'm dead tired right now. Can you sift through them during my sleep?"

Severus Snape was astonished. The most powerful wizard alive was asking to get into his mind, to fetch information? He nodded, thoughtful. The possibilities were endless...

Noticing the glint in his Potion Master's eyes, Albus chuckled softly. "I'd advise you to concentrate on Malfoy and how to stop him. We have only the night, and if you go astray, you'll find so many memories of useless actions and facts that you'll get lost. Why do you think I need your help?"

Ashamed at being discovered, but ready for the ordeal, Severus took his wand out and waited, as Albus Dumbledore transfigured his chair into a comfortable bed and went to sleep. No more than five minutes afterwards, the old man was asleep and his friend was sitting next to him, his body rigid as he was sifting through more than 150 years of memories.

The same evening, again, at the Burrow...

"Mrs Weasley! Mrs Weasley!"

Molly arrived in the living room, wiping her hands on her apron, called by a voice she didn't know. There, on the carpet, lied the unconscious form of her daughter and, around her stood Ron and his friends Dean and Seamus, visibly tired.

"What happened?" she demanded, while carrying Ginny on the couch.

Dean hesitantly began "Well, we wanted to amuse Ron a little, so we prepared a day to visit some muggles funny activities, like the movies or the arcade rooms. He seemed to appreciate some of the things, because I saw him smile on the occasion."

"When we arrived at the funfair," Seamus continued, "Ron noticed a girl that looked a lot like Ginny, and that got our attention." At this, Molly looked at them inquiringly, but let them continue. "We didn't have time to ask her name or whatever, because Ron had already left for another show. We took a ride through the horror train ride. Nothing scary, really, even if some youth talked about a really good monster."

"There, Ron and Ginny took a cart, and we took the next. The only thing we know, when we get out of the ride, is that Ginny is unconscious. The show keeper told us that, apparently, she yelled something before collapsing. Ron didn't say anything, but he appeared... I don't know, I don't understand him anymore. I'd say he looked smug, or even satisfied. But I don't understand why."

"Thank you, boys. Thanks for bringing her back. I'll deal with her now. Do you want to stay over dinner?"

"No, thanks, madam. My parents are already anxious and they are waiting for us to return. Can we?"

"Sure, young men. Have a good time before classes."

"Thanks madam, goodbye. Bye Ron."

The boys gone, Molly Weasley fetched her wand from the kitchen and, thinking about the uselessness of a global outlawing of underage magic, directed it to her daughter, and muttered “enervate.”

Ginny’s head shot up and around, looking afraid and lost. Seeing her mother, she went to cry on her shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably. A long time afterwards, the women separated, the young one having fallen asleep without success in explaining her collapse, from which she appeared not to have any memory. Ron had fallen asleep also, lying backwards on the recliner and, seeing his happy face, Molly didn’t have the nerve to scold him.

Still the same evening, Grace’s guest bedroom...

“Hello, sleepyhead.”

Gabriel’s head shot up, right eye wide open, to the shocked gasp of the people present. Joan and Grace had known Gabriel for a while, but his eye was different now. Different, and afraid. He began to recoil from them.

Grace was the first to react to the panicked youth. “Relax. We’re here for you, Gabriel, remember?” Joan merely nodded at this.

The soothing words uttered by the woman, and the girl from whose face he couldn’t detach his gaze, finally got to him. His question, though, surprised them.

“Where am I?”

After a time, Grace began explaining to the questioning teen. “You are at home, in my guest room. Your room since two months ago, actually. We think you had an accident at some point. I swear, it’s the last time you play the fool in there. I don’t want your blood on my hands, young man!” She scolded him, unaware that her sentence met only incomprehension from him, and continued. “When that girl got out, screaming, I knew something had arrived. I mean, it’s pretty common to scream inside a ghost ride, but outside?” Turning towards the girl next to her, she asked. “Did you notice her, Joan? She looked like you a lot.”

When Joan shook her head negatively, Grace continued. "Well... I paused the ride and got someone to fetch Michael so that he got you and brought you here. The girl who screamed had already been escorted outside by her friends, to be healed, they said. She seemed really shaken. That's quite all. Now, can you tell us what happened?"

The teen on the bed, whose eye wasn't crimson anymore, but a light brown, seemed to be thinking, hard. Timidly, he then raised his head, and spoke. What came from his mouth, though, wasn't quite what they expected.

"What did you say my name was, again?"  
The next morning, at the Burrow...

"Ron! RON!"

"Hmm? What?"

Molly Weasley, mother of a brood of seven, was at a loss about her sixth. Ronald Weasley had never been detached from the world, before. Not that much, and not at all anyway. The summer had passed quickly, because she still had five children to take care of, not counting her husband deeply in political problems. But she didn't understand Ron's state of mind and had to push him towards the fireplace where the twins and Ginny were waiting for them, ready to go to Diagon Alley for day of shopping.

Ron was oblivious to everything. Even the owl he got from the Ministry, the Service of Underage Magic warning him not to cast a spell again or he'd be expelled, hadn't affected him. It had affected his other family members, though. Ginny had been furious again. Molly, while trying to placate Ginny and after having confiscated Ron's wand to avoid any accident, wasn't pleased at the Ministry's insistence. The twins plotted as usual. And her husband didn't have time to discuss about it.

In fact, Arthur seldom had time for his family recently. That very morning, he had left for the Ministry in the wee hours of the morning, to 'help Dumbledore sort things', as he told an anguished Molly. Truth be told, all Weasley were afraid of Malfoy being Minister of Magic. They were sure that, once that was done, they would be the first target of unjust laws and procedures. Still, they couldn't go against the people's will, could they? Still, the simple fact that Arthur went to work with something like trepidation in his eyes was a sign that hope wasn't lost. Yet.

Sighing, Molly pushed Ron through the green flames to the Leaky Cauldron, and followed, wary of not tripping on her own son once they arrived. Once there, they didn't separate as they usually did the previous years. They stayed as a red-headed group, and the sombre stares from the twins discouraged anyone to make fun of the dreamy Ron.

Not everybody made fun of him, though. Some were simply oblivious. And one person appeared to be very interested in Ron's attitude. However, once Ginny heard the voice, she couldn't help but wince, before turning around to watch the exchange.

"Hi, Ron."

"Hi, Luna."

"Seen the double-horned cantwyrms around town?"

"Why, yes! They are hungry today."

"Not like three days ago, the earth got angry."

"Of course. Still, I wouldn't want to be caught unprepared."

"Neither do I. I'm going to the apothecary, by the way."

"Take a bag of toothless berries, we'll need some this year."

"Sure. It had been a pleasure."

“Same here, see you on the Express.”

And they separated. During the entire conversation, the whole Weasley family had had their jaws hanging. That was the first real discussion Ron had with anybody since he fell in his distant state. Well, if the wistful chit-chat could be understood as a discussion. Ginny especially was upset, because she knew how the Ravensclaws generally treated Luna, hiding her stuff and mocking her, and she didn't want that sort of things happening to her brother. After a little time, when they all got hold of themselves, they finished the indicated school shopping and returned home. Ron was as silent and dreamy as before, but now, Ginny started to understand how to manage him.

“Did you notice the Grim?” Ron's tone of voice and question surprised everyone, again, as they flooded back in their living room.

“Oh, Ron, don't say those things, it's awful!” Molly sounded distressed. Seeing a Grim, in the wizarding literature, was a sure sign that death was near. Only a few people joked about that, and most of them were mad. Still, in Ron's state...

Ginny took the problem in her hands. “Don't worry, mum, it's one of his crisis again. Go to the kitchen and prepare some tea. I'll handle him. Don't worry, he'll forget.”

As she left the room, Molly still heard the first words of his son, and shivered.

“I saw him in Knockturn All...”

And, as surprising as it seems, that was true. In the shadows of Knockturn Alley, and in the darkest recesses of Diagon Alley, a large and black animal had been watching them all the time. Earlier the same morning, in the Minister's office...

Albus Dumbledore had passed a surprisingly good night, and was feeling refreshed when he woke up early that day. The first thing to

come to his generally well-organized mind, though, beside a lemon candy, was the crumpled form of Severus Snape at the foot of his bed. Frowning, and remembering what was at stake, he started to feel a dread filling him at his friend possible failure.

Getting on his feet, he went to the lying body of his preferred spy, and was relieved to find that he was only sleeping soundly. Conjuring a platter of breakfast food and tea, he proceeded to wake his friend.

Standing painfully and stretching before sitting on a comfortable chair, Severus gladly took the proffered tea, refusing the scones. They stayed like this in companionable silence, both sorting their thoughts from their newly-awaken state. The door opened and closed, letting the red-haired frame of Arthur Weasley pass through. That made them both look towards the new room occupant.

As only explanation, he shrugged, throwing a glance at the clock that rested on the mantelpiece of the office's fireplace, and muttered "I couldn't sleep anymore."

"It's okay, Arthur." Dumbledore answered, Snape seeming in thoughts. "We hadn't started yet, still in the shores of sleep." Turning towards the Potion Master, he asked the fateful question.

"So, Severus, what did you find?"

After another silence, gathering his thoughts, he answered. "You were right, Albus." He stopped at his familiarity for a second, and then reflected that he shared the thoughts of the aged Headmaster, and that it was something that would allow a little more ease in his future chats with the old man.

"Right? I'm often right, Severus." The surprised face Dumbledore made was now replaced by a benign one.

"...when you said that you had too many memories. I spent a good part of the night trying to figure your mind's sorting methods. I'm sure that, even when I was sleeping after that, I got nightmares of it."

Seeing the anxious faces of his listeners, Snape chose to stop trying to make jokes and cut to the subject at hand. "Still, I found some things. Remember what Malfoy's house-elf told us? Well, you had a discussion with Harry, and..." once again, Severus Snape stopped, surprised with the ease with which he called Harry Potter by his given name instead of his family name as usual. Frowning, he reflected that he would have serious mind re-sorting to do before the start of term, to avoid acting like Dumbledore and making a fool of himself in front of his students.

"And?" Arthur asked, on tenterhooks.

"And he told you that shelves fell on Lucius, and these were heavy shelves. Harry... got himself seriously hurt and almost died, weren't it for the house-elf. Besides, young Draco was called back to his Manor some time afterwards. You remember? Around a week before the end of term."

"I do."

"When Lucius Malfoy reappeared recently, and wrote in every available paper that his son was dead, that got me thinking. Tell me, Albus, what do we know about the boy's death?"

"Almost..."

"...nothing, right." Snape was launched, and he wasn't to stop before reaching his conclusion. In that regard, he was like an embodied thought train and, oddly, it reminded Arthur of a particular girl that his sixth son got to know.

"So, on one side we have Lucius Malfoy, who we don't know the health of, but that should be badly hurt. On the other, his son, supposedly dead and buried. And now, a strutting Lucius Malfoy is running for Minister. Successfully." A pause. "Tell me, Albus, would you consider normal if a godfather wasn't to be invited to his godson's burial?"

“Errm...” the others were thrown off course by the non-sequitur. Albus, thinking about the last burial they went to, asked “You mean, about Sirius Black not present to Harry’s...”

“No!” Snape was shocked. How could the Headmaster associate him to the flea-bitten mutt? “No, I was thinking about Draco and me. He is my godson, didn’t you know?”

“Oh! I remember, now. True. And you weren’t invited? Nor told about it?”

“Exactly. Strange circumstances of I may add.” Snape considered Dumbledore for a moment, and then continued. “Albus, you had a weird thought floating in your head at one point. Perhaps your subconscious was forming suggestions for me while I explored. Well... you seemed to think that Lucius was dead, and his son was replacing him, acting like him.”

Albus’ eyes went wide, while Arthur looked intrigued. “What do you mean? He’s 12; he can’t replace his father like that.”

“Actually he can, Arthur.” Snape explained patiently. “As a Potion Master, I might have taught him some interesting and extra-curricular potions. As I recall, one of them was an Aging Elixir. Properly brewed and ingested, it could cause the person to physically age any number of years. And Draco physically resembled his father very much already, so I guess the only obstacle before totally becoming his father would be his mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like the post owls’ internal compass. Someone can’t be appointed Minister or any other high-ranking Ministry position without subjecting to a test, in the form of drinking a potion before answering a few questions. The draught that has to be ingested is a mild truth serum, associated with a counter to any form of mind domination spell like the Imperius, and the person has to give his or her full name. In the case where our little theory holds true, if Draco’s mind isn’t

tampered with, the potion will make him states a wrong name and he wouldn't be elected. So his mind must have been altered."

"This seems difficult to do, though, massively tampering a mind like this..."

"I agree with you, Arthur." Albus intervened. "But it has been done in History already. Remember the story of the Three Mad Sisters?" The three men stopped talking for a minute, remembering the two sisters who had to successively take the place of the assassinated third, and who had, to do so, altered their minds to the point of madness.

"He may become mad, then?"

"It's a possibility. But, once elected, it won't be a problem for him anymore. Voldemort would take over quickly, and he will be only remembered as the in-between that caused the Dark Lord to gain hold of the Ministry."

"If this is the case, what can we do?"

Always organized, Snape took the direction again. "First, we have to discover if our theory is correct. I knew Lucius pretty well, I could ask him some innocent question when he'll come in the Ministry in..." he looked at the clock, "...three hours. Either Lucius or Draco would make a grand entrance, possibly using the main atrium. I'll wait him there and ask the question, which only the real Lucius would know the answer to. If he answers correctly, it's the real one and, short to an assassination right there, we can't really prevent him from gaining the position. If he doesn't answer correctly, it will be Draco and we can act on that."

"How can we react?" Arthur, while being fairly clever and resourceful, didn't have the tortuous mind of the Potion Master, or the century-and-a-half experience of the Headmaster.

Not answering him directly, Severus Snape asked. "Do you remember the potion that was forbidden 62 years ago, Albus? The Mind Expanding Draught?"

“Hmm... vaguely, yes. It was invented by a madman who wanted to become a genius?”

“He was already a genius, even if deranged, so it wasn't the problem. The potion was forbidden because of one of its ingredients. It's absolutely forbidden to get the blood of a unicorn for any potion, anywhere, nowadays. I'm not complaining, but as a Potion Master, I'd know that there are no good substitution ingredients to that.”

“And?” both were interested now.

“You remember Harry's hideous discovery, last year, in the Forbidden Forest?”

“He saw a... Oh!” Albus was aghast at his friend's implication. “You didn't!”

“I couldn't refrain myself, Headmaster. Besides, the creature was already dead. I preferred to harvest the few drops I could, instead of letting it waste to the soil. I was found out by the centaurs, though, and barely escaped.” He smiled grimly, raising his robe and left pant leg to show an ugly scar.

“Ahem... would you mind explaining? I was not there...” Arthur was, once again, left after in the conversation.

“He took... some Unicorn Blood, from a dead unicorn that Voldemort killed.” Albus breathed.

A silence.

Arthur spoke up. “So, that means that you can make the potion? Speaking of which, what does it do?”

“The mad genius got the potion recipe wrong. In fact he became mad and genius following an earlier and totally unrecorded experiment by Grindewald... sorry, Albus.” Snape added towards the wincing old man, who had had a large part in said Dark Lord

Grindewald demise, a few decades before. “And the potion he made merely restored his initial mind, so in fact, he lost his genius, and didn’t invent any other potion or anything else. The potion should have been named Mind Restoring Draught.”

A silence, while Albus and Arthur look at each other with the same spark in their eyes, before turning to the nervous Potion Master. “Severus?” Albus started.

“Yes?”

“How many doses of that draught can you make with your stock of unicorn blood?”

“Errm... if I recall correctly, only four drops would be needed for a small-sized cauldron, and that would make... after evaporation... errr... two doses. And I have around twenty drops of blood.”

“Do you think it would be possible to cure the Longbottoms?”

A surprised Potion Master looked between his old Headmaster and the redhead in wonder, trying to collect himself.

“Well... if the potion works, it could be possible. But we have to find if it works first.”

“Don’t you think that, without taking Frank or Alice for guinea pigs, uncovering Draco Malfoy would be more important?” Arthur asked.

“Hmmm... you’re right, I guess. All right, I’ll make the thing. I’ll even make two batches at the same time, as it takes the same duration, and we’ll have spares in case a bottle breaks at one point. I have just the time, so I’ll go now. I’ll be back in two hours.”

Before Snape left, though, Arthur asked another question. “And how are we going to make Malfoy drink it?”

“Remember,” answered Dumbledore, “the would-be Minister has to drink a mild truth serum at some point. We’ll mix the two draughts, won’t we, Severus?”

Reflecting for a minute, the Potion Master nodded, absentmindedly saying “The ingredients of both aren’t in opposition, either directly or indirectly. They won’t cancel each other and should work together too.”

“Should?”

“Well, for each potion, even masterfully brewed, there is always a slight risk of error. My goal, as a Potion Master, is to reduce that risk near to zero.”

“You could say that to your students, Severus, they wouldn’t be that afraid afterwards.”

“Please don’t joke about that, Albus; you’d kill me before my time. Whatever, I’ll be going now. I’ll be in two hours in St Mungo, near the Longbottoms. Don’t come, as I don’t want everyone’s eyes looking towards the ward where the current Minister-in-interim and most-powerful-wizard-of-his-time goes.” Ignoring said Minister’s chuckles, he kept going. “I’ll come back here later to tell you. The potion should work in five minutes... Oh! And, Albus...”

“Yes?”

“If it works on Longbottom, I’ll have to treat both at some point, and I’ll certainly have to hide that from St Mungo’s officials... you’ll have to have a chat with them. Furthermore, if it restores the mind, my guess is that they won’t recognize their son anyway. For them he would only be one year old.”

The old Headmaster nodded, agreeing, and the Potion Master apparated away.

Albus and Arthur stayed a long moment looking at the advancing hands of the clock, before one of them speak again.

“Albus?”

“Yes, Arthur?”

“Do you think it will work?”

“It should... it's our only hope.”

Another long moment of thoughtful clock-watching after which...

“Albus?”

“Hmm?”

“If it works, what are we going to do? Who will be Minister?”

Not having thought about that, Albus reflected for a moment, looking at the fire, before turning back towards his friend, wide-eyed.

“That would be the next-in-line in the votes, Arthur. Legally, that would be you.”

To be continued in next chapter: Hunting the Truth...

Are they wrong or are they right?

Will they get their minds alright?

Review, and I promise that

I'll quickly post the next part.

## Chapter 12 – Hunting the Truth

The billowing dark cloak of the hurrying man was, as well as the man himself, known as a symbol of terror by all teenagers that went to Hogwarts, as well as many young adults who freshly graduated from said school. The employees of St Mungo didn't say anything to stop the decided Potion Master but kept asking, among themselves, where he was going and why. Severus Snape was paying a visit to a couple of 'old friends.'

On the way, though, he spotted the Grangers and stopped. Mark was holding a sleeping Jane on his shoulder, and they looked like they cried a lot. Severus went to a young nurse nearby and addressed her in his harshest tone.

"What are the Grangers doing in the corridor?"

The terrified nurse could only start to stammer a vague "I didn't know that..." before Snape went to the patients' registry, which was displaying their status, and was also magically updated. Seeing that Hermione was in proper condition to see her parents, he scowled at the nurse and went to the waiting Grangers. Catching their attention and beckoning to them, he directed them into their daughter's room. There was Hermione, unhappy at the lack of study material in the room. Not able to even physically leave her bed, she had already counted the number of tiles on the floor, walls and ceiling, and computed the room's volume using different methods. Now she was bored. Ready to snap to the people invading her boredom, she turned and gasped, before falling in tears.

"Mum! Dad!"

That elicited squeals of happiness and laughter from the parents who hugged their daughter endlessly. Seeing an unmoving dark shape being them, Hermione squinted her eyes and recognized her Potion Professor.

"Professor Snape?"

“He brought you here, dear.” His dad answered. “You were – how did they say? – depleted?”

“Depleted.” Severus Snape’s voice wasn’t warm, nor wasn’t it as cold as Hermione remembered. Approaching the bed, he looked intently into her eyes. “I hope that in the future, you’ll refrain from studying way too much, Miss Granger,” he said. “Still, if you want to properly research into new directions, you should ask me, once you get back to Hogwarts. Research is part of the Potion Master diploma, after all.”

Hermione was stunned. Here was her golden opportunity, and she wasn’t to let it fall. After shaking herself, she answered. “I’d love to, sir.”

He gazed at her strangely for a moment, then collected himself and continued. “We’ll see each other soon, then. In the meantime, I’d advise you to pay attention to the news. There should be some interesting developments soon.” He smiled, then left the room.

Hermione was looking at the closed door in awe. Snape had indirectly proposed to tutor her in research! And he had smiled! The day was decidedly starting strangely. She then turned back to her parents and they caught back on two months’ worth of family discussions.

Meanwhile, Snape was almost running through the building, towards the long-term ward. He had taken some time with Hermione and his planning was tight. Still, he liked her eagerness to learn and to explore new avenues. That was what research was. That was what he had always wanted to do. Incidentally, that’s also why he coveted the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts position. And don’t you dare calling the course ‘DADA’ in his presence! That sounded ridiculous, like a French name, or horse, even. He wanted the position because he always thought that it didn’t require great preparation, contrarily to Potions, where he had to devise recipes; harvest ingredients to be lost to stupid students; clean the dungeon of sticky potions that daily littered the floor, walls and sometimes even ceiling, thankfully with the help of students in detention; and grading homework.

No, he thought, Defence must be lighter on the teacher's shoulders. He shrugged, while still moving through the hospital. Even a fraud author could do it, so, why not him? And then he could use some time to do practical research. He always wondered, for instance, what was the impact of moonlight on a simmering cauldron of Wolfsbane. He did make some research while attaining his diploma but that was a long time ago, and now that he was employed, he didn't have time anymore. As he reached the doors to the room where the Longbottoms were kept, he decided to ask for the Defence position to Dumbledore a last time, and to explain his real reasons, this time. Perhaps the old man knew them already, and had waited all this time for him to be honest about them. 'Damn the manipulative Headmaster!' he finally thought, putting his ranting mind to a pause. Crossing a privacy curtain, he looked at the prone forms of Alice and Franck Longbottom.

They had been tortured with the Cruciatus curse for a very long time, he reflected, and went mad from that. Perhaps the potion didn't work in that case? He calmed his frantic mind, and took one little bottle from each batch of potions. What he wanted was to give one to each and determine if one batch was better than the other. He administered the potions and waited for the effects to appear.

After one minute, nothing happened.

After two minutes, nothing happened either.

After two minutes and a half, still nothing had happened and he was starting to get upset.

But, after two minutes and forty-fives seconds, they started to react. Alice first, then Frank, started to move their eyes in little movements, and continued by quickly showing all sort of expressions on their face, starting with pain. He gathered that their mind was re-constructing itself, going from their latest experience to the earliest. Perhaps their years' worth of amnesia caused these three minutes without reaction. If that was true, was the duration while the potion worked correlated to the person's age? Always something to note. Always something to research. Snape was enjoying himself immensely, but he stopped

these thoughts as their display of emotions stopped abruptly, and they both looked at him curiously.

Reflecting for a second, and damning himself for not bringing someone with him to explain things, he bent towards them, and talked with a low voice.

“You just woke from a long sleep. But I can’t explain more right now because of a Death Eater emergency.” He was sure that this got their attention, as they both were Aurors at the time of their demise. Sure, they stirred, obviously wanting to get up and fight. “Don’t move! Don’t talk, even. Your body is not used to move anymore, as it really has been a long time. Don’t worry, I’ll be back in a few hours to explain everything, I promise.” He looked thoughtful for a second or two. “I can only tell you that your son is alive and well. Until I’m back, try not to indicate you awoke.” He rose, looking them in the eye. ‘Damn,’ he thought, ‘hiding that spark of intelligence will be difficult.’

He looked at them for a short while, and then left for the Ministry.

Apparating directly in the Minister’s office, which wards had been customized by Dumbledore to let him pass, he checked that nobody was there first, and then smiled at them and raised his thumb.

“Longbottoms, check.”

The smile that graced the aged Headmaster was a reward in itself. It even brought some of the old twinkle in his eyes. Arthur was visibly happy also. Snape gave the remaining two vials of potion to Dumbledore, so that he would mix one of them with the official induction potion. Both batches had been perfect, and Dumbledore would then have the spare one. He then left, true to the plan, to wait for Malfoy in the atrium. The schedule had been so tight that, five mere minutes after he appeared there, Malfoy and his clique pranced into the Ministry atrium. Snape recognized MacNair and Nott, but Malfoy had an air to him... something not quite right. Or rather, something that would be quite right if Lucius Malfoy wasn’t really Lucius Malfoy.

He went to the impostor, a smile plastered on his face and his hand forwards, ready to congratulate him. 'Lucius' took his hand, and they shook while he praised the man's success in the votes. One more point. Lucius never shook hands. With anyone. Well, he could be really excited about taking the Ministry over, so Snape forced himself for the last test. Something only he and Lucius knew.

"Tell me, Lucius, how is my old love doing?"

The other man looked surprised, then thoughtful, before quickly answering. "My! I didn't remember you had fallen for my dear Cissa. She's fine, thank you."

'Lucius', having answered the question using the few borrowed memories he had of Snape turning around the Black family, took his leave of Severus to be honoured by the other persons present. Snape's smile, though, ever present because of Malfoy's retinue, was forced. He had had to expose his guts to speak like that, and that man – no, that boy – invented that lie on the spot. When Severus was younger, he had fallen in love with Bellatrix Black, sister to Narcissa Black who later married Lucius Malfoy. He and Sirius Black had even got into a fight and a long-term enmity because of that. Sometimes, thinking about it, he also thought that he had joined the Death Eaters because of her. Needless to say, he had been struck a deadly blow when she married Rodolphus Lestrange. That had been right after that episode that he confided to Dumbledore, and started to spy. Spiteful about her treachery, he had never fallen again for anyone. And his general behaviour wouldn't have helped if he had.

Grimly smiling at the Malfoy's retreating back, he went through a side door to join Dumbledore and Arthur in the induction room, where the ceremony was to take place. Most of the press was already there.

When Malfoy entered the room, almost everybody applauded. Everything was going smoothly, and in a few minutes, he would legally control the wizarding part of Britain.

He went to the podium and, after the compulsory standard introduction to this type of ceremony by Dumbledore, and a few ritual

questions and answers, the vial was held to 'Lucius'. Snape had told Dumbledore to wait for a few seconds at least, until the potion's effect of sorting the mind was finished. In this case, only thirty seconds were sufficient, before Malfoy's eyes stopped going in every directions.

"What is thine full name?" the dreaded official question filled the whole amphitheatre. It was the last question. Malfoy was smiling. Arthur's hands were trembling. Snape was paling anxiously, hoping that the potion was correctly dosed and administered.

Malfoy's mouth opened. Closed. And opened again.

"Draco Ursinus Malfoy-Black."

A stunned silence ensued, and then utterly chaotic pandemonium erupted.

Meanwhile, in a funfair full of muggles...

The teenager sitting in front of Joan at the food stall wasn't quite exactly the one she had known as Gabriel. Sure, he looked the same, was equally scarred, although a great deal of it seemed to have disappeared over the days. For example, his neck was now totally healed. It surprised her because she didn't remember going to the hospital with him to treat this. The only time he went without her, it had been to remove his leg cast, and she doubted that he could have sustained plastic surgery in the short time he'd been away.

His right eye also had changed. It was a dark shade of red before, and now looked like a mix between a dull grey and light brown colour. When he had opened it after his long period of unconsciousness, she had been shocked. How could one change one's eye colour? The only method she heard about was with using coloured contact lenses, and she doubted that he used them.

The worst of this was his memory. While still laughing at the same jokes, and looking at her in the same way as before, he suffered holes in his memory. She had already remarked that, previously,

because he had seldom spoken about his own history, and she had noticed that it wasn't due to shyness. Each time they had been discussing this, his eye had been darting left and right, instead of focusing on internal images. He had looked like he was searching for his memories without finding them. But now, he made no attempt at hiding his amnesia. He didn't even remember his own name! The self-affirmed Gabriel Swift, who had proper papers and all, now wasn't sure about his name anymore. Besides, he didn't have the same eye colour as the papers' picture, now.

Joan was suspicious about the other girl. What if he knew her? What if she made that to him? While they were eating, her explaining his own recent history to him, a kind of plan emerged in her mind. She would have to trick Grace into this, because the old woman wasn't generally intrusive in other's problems. But that was important.

Some time after their meal, she proposed the idea to Grace, who surprisingly agreed immediately to the idea. In fact, the old woman was feeling somewhat guilty of letting the redhead enter the ride without warning him, the other day. So she easily agreed to participate. The next person to convince was Gabriel himself. Grace took charge of that, bringing him in the ticket booth, where they could begin the work together.

He was to draw, using his newly-affirmed talent, portraits of the red-haired girl people and her three friends that went to the ride that evening. And Grace was to direct him, using her memories. Like an identification police officer.

She decided to start on the boys, because she remembered them better. It took most of the remaining of the day to achieve the three boys' faces, though, because of the queue of people waiting for the ride. After closing the show that evening, they took a quick dinner, and went to work on the girl's face.

What started as a guided and friendly drawing session, that evening, quickly turned into a solitary, silent, and furious scratching of the pen on the sheet of paper. Then on a second sheet. Then a third and fourth. Gabriel hadn't needed much directions to draw her face, and he had followed by drawing her entirely, sitting at a tree, and then

reading a book. The pictures, although drawn with a black pen, were almost life-like and Grace was impressed. She also was anxious, as that meant something.

He knew her.

But he hadn't remembered her previously.

Perhaps, she reflected, it meant that meeting her was good to unlock his mind? Joan had told her that he was suffering from a severe form of amnesia.

Joan.

He had met her and hit on her quite immediately, and she suspected now that it was because of the resemblance between the two. If that was true, Joan was going to be very sad in the future, because she seemed to be quite taken by him.

Hearing the pen scratching stop, she glanced at the last picture, and remarked that it wasn't finished. Looking at him, she saw him frown. She turned back towards the picture, ready to ask him if something was wrong, when she remarked the global setting of the unfinished picture.

Her hair seemed to be flowing in the wind.

There were only clouds around.

She was flying.

On a broom.

If what she suspected before was true, the speed and easy drawing of the girl indicated that he was extracting her picture from his memory. But now she wasn't so sure. How could one remember seeing someone flying on a broom? Unless he saw that on a movie or in a fiction book, of course.

"Gabriel?"

“Hmm?”

“You know her?”

At the question, he raised his head. “Of course.”

Sighing, she continued. “What’s her name?”

“It’s...” he hesitated, if only a little “J.”

“You know, that’s the nickname you gave to Joan. And this is not Joan.”

He went silent for a while, looking the first picture thoughtfully. The face of the unknown girl was looking at him, lips full and eyes seeming to spark. He was sure to know her, and to know her very well, but couldn’t pinpoint her precisely.

“I’m sure... it sounds like that, though.”

“Do you remember something about her?” She asked, pointing vaguely at the pictures, finishing by the incomplete fourth.

“I’m not sure either... this broom is weird, but I can’t seem to find it strange now that I drew it.”

“Did you see it, or even her, in a movie or a book?”

He didn’t answer, obviously considering the possible answers. After a while, she left him to his thoughts, and when she went to sleep, one hour later, he hadn’t answered and was still thinking.

Sensing his discomfort, Grace let him stay home the next day. Besides, even if he didn’t really know if his name was Gabriel, he remembered most of the time he spent as Gabriel. And that he had a daily work appointment at the bookstore. After helping the shopkeeper storing books and generally dusting the place, he went back to the mobile home Grace shared with him.

Once there, he reflected about books and especially the one he got some days before. For lack of better things to do, except looking at the girl drawing, he decided to read it.

After forcing himself reading for a few hours, he finally couldn't make head or tails about the more complicated methods of secretly sending and receiving messages. So he skipped most of the pages, browsing for anything of interest. The last few pages held his attention for a second, but he didn't know why. It was a mere list of other books referenced in this one, accompanied by an explanation of the referencing vocabulary. He was sure not to know any of these books, but the mere wording of the references, containing numbers and acronyms, made him reflect hard, although unsuccessfully. He almost threw the book away, when the sun, reflecting on the ring on his hand, held his eye. It was his signet ring, wasn't it? Reflecting about it, and the fact that he wasn't sure about his identity anymore, he removed it, wondering. Nobody asked him about it, and he never started a discussion about it either.

Holding it in the light, and looking it over, he noticed something written inside, in very little characters. Squinting to read it, he wrote it down to be able to understand it better.

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Now that the letters were written down, they struck with an air of familiarity. Well, only the first part. Reopening the book to the bibliography section, he browsed it again, and understood.

To gain space in heavily-referencing books that were the streak in the technology domain, a system had been designed, that identified the books using only the publisher and a unique number. And the first part of his ring's indication looked like some unknown book. He couldn't understand the rest, though.

Sighing, he put the book and the drawings on the shelf he had taken for himself and the ring back on his finger. He would have questions to ask to Mrs Marshall tomorrow.

Meanwhile, at the Burrow...

Remus Lupin had cried, like all of Harry's friends, upon hearing about his death. However, Remus Lupin, because of the habits he had acquired due his unnatural condition, was very shy. He rarely showed his emotions, and, even if he did, it was only to his close friends. And, still because of his condition, he had very little friends. He was a werewolf.

He had been bitten at the young age of five, to his parents' despair, and had learned from since, how to conceal his feelings, and how to imprison himself every month. Contrarily to what Fudge had said at one point, bitten werewolves weren't all bloodthirsty monsters. Not all the time, and not voluntarily, at least. In that regard, the use of the Wolfsbane potion was recommended to all such werewolves, as it calmed their instincts during the three nights of the full moon. All in all, the werewolf condition was easier than in the previous centuries. But there were people, as prejudiced as the former Minister of Magic, who weren't able to understand that, and almost nobody was able to consider a werewolf as friendly.

So, Remus Lupin had lived a life full of distrust, almost without friends. Only three boys were able to befriend him, during his stay at Hogwarts: James Potter, Sirius Black, and Peter Pettigrew. They were individually known as Moony, Prongs, Padfoot and Wormtail, and collectively as the infamous Marauders, pulling pranks all over the school. His friends even learnt the animagus transformation by themselves, to help him during the full moon. But, during the years, he had seen his few friends disappear: James and his wife had been killed by Voldemort, and Sirius Black has been imprisoned after killing Peter Pettigrew and a few muggles. Or so he had thought. The summer had been full of surprises.

Soon after having been told to look after his friend's son Harry, he had learned his death. And, shortly thereafter, Dumbledore had informed him of Sirius' innocence. Afterwards, the Headmaster had given the fact to Amelia Bones and the press, thus publicly releasing the information. His friend Sirius Black was innocent! The problem was that, a few days before that release, said friend escaped from

Azkaban, being the first to do so, and he had been unreachable since then.

Then, there has been the announcement of Fudge's demise, for which he had been thankful; and Malfoy's campaign, for which he had been anxious. Looking back, the summer really looked like a roller coaster, with its ups and downs.

In the meantime, as Dumbledore had asked, he had visited the Weasley a few times, to chat a little bit with Ginny, about the Chamber and her recovery. The visits weren't easy for both, because it always brought the subject of Harry up. She didn't have problems going over her possession, but still was only half-convinced of Harry's death, and he was still unable to convince her otherwise. They generally went to the light forest near the Burrow, thinking and calmly discussing recent events. Sometimes, they got the impression of being watched, but dismissed it after nothing had happened.

That afternoon, they had decided to go in the forest, as usual. Ron, in his faraway voice, told them to beware of wolves, and both of them had shot him an annoyed look. Ginny knew of Remus' condition, because of their mutual understanding and his admission. That didn't bother her, though, unlike her brother's comment. But they discussed about that, too, and both found Ron's general attitude strange and worrying. They then talked about Remus' youth and his friends. The topic quickly returned to the Potters, and then to Dumbledore recent discovery about their secret keeper.

At one point, the conversation between the two became a little strained, because of the feeling of being watched. They stopped talking, taking in their surroundings. The light forest wasn't generally infested with dark or dangerous creatures, so they didn't think that any danger would get to them. Still, the feeling of uneasiness pushed them to stand and get ready for anything. As soon as they were upright, a large wolf-like beast pounced on Remus from behind the largest tree around. Even being a werewolf, with superior strength, agility, and senses, Remus didn't seem to be able to dodge the attack, and he fell on his back, the creature atop him.

Ginny shrieked "Remus!" and was ready to attack the beast herself, or to flee. But the sound coming from the two creatures fighting on the ground made her stop, disturbed so much that she thought she was dreaming.

Remus was laughing.

She stumbled back and, her foot catching on a root, she fell on her behind, too stunned to react. True, Ron had warned them about wolves, but... wait a minute! Since when had Ron taken on divination? She definitely had to ask someone competent about Ron. Perhaps Dumbledore himself...

Looking towards the fight, she noticed that what she thought as being a wolf was in fact a large black dog, and it was licking the face and neck of Remus, making him laugh, and call a name. "Padfoot! Stop!"

So that meant that Remus knew the grim-like creature... Still in shock about Ron's supposed ability, Ginny abruptly remembered him speaking about a Grim before. Could it be the same dog? She had to ask Remus, as he seemed to know it. Said Remus was standing up, the dog running around him in what seemed good-natured dog joy, when suddenly, the sight in front of her changed once more, and instead of a dog, a man was standing. He was lanky and appeared famished. His hair was dishevelled and his beard untrimmed. But he seemed happy nonetheless. He and Remus hugged themselves like very old friends, long separated.

Feeling she was intruding, and somewhat stunned at the display, Ginny merely indicated that she was going back to the Burrow, before leaving the pair in the clearing, still hugging, and in tears. They seemed to have much to discuss. Once back in the Burrow, Ron called after her.

"Hi Gin. How's the mutt today?"

A silence, then, squinting her eyes, she answered. "How did you know?"

“You didn’t watch the signs. He was there this morning, remember?” And he turned back towards his chess game. Having nobody to play with anymore, he was moving his pieces aimlessly on the board. Ginny understood the underlying meaning of his sentence. He had obviously seen the dog around Diagon Alley. Taking pity of his brother’s state, and ashamed at the family’s reaction to it, she proposed a few games, that he readily accepted. He lost them, though, but she was delighted to see that he enjoyed the games so much that he was smiling the whole time.

A short time afterwards, it was dinner time, and the Weasleys were gathered around the table, when Remus and the other man stumbled through the door.

“Remus! And... who are you, sir?” Arthur asked, pleased to see the werewolf, but wary of the unkempt man, even if he and Remus seemed good friends.

The man muttered something and blushed, coughed a little, and, seeming to brace himself for a bad reaction, repeated louder. “Sirius Black.”

There was a shocked silence in the kitchen, only interrupted after a few seconds by Ron’s “told ya.”

Arthur then rose, smiling, and extended his hand towards the pardoned convict. “Nice to meet you, finally. Sorry for all this time, that bloody Minister covered it very well.”

“I know, sir. Remus just told me everything he knew. From Harry... ” a short pause, filled with emotion, then “...to the letter proving my innocence.”

“Please, call me Arthur. Here are my wife Molly, and kids Percy, Fred and George, Ron, and Ginny. We were all distressed by all... that happened. But now, everything will be fine. Even that Malfoy mess is sorted, after all.”

“What Malfoy mess?” everyone asked, curious. Most had known about Lucius Malfoy running for Minister, but they supposed the man had been elected and were bracing for the worst coming the next day.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Arthur’s eyes were filling with mischief, a proof that some of his offsprings’ attitude wasn’t entirely educational.

A pause, then indignant voices filled the room. “No! You didn’t! Now spill it already!”

Smiling, he held his hands up, trying to appease them. “Well, I wanted to wait for tomorrow’s papers...”

“Since you know, you’d better tell, now.” Molly’s voice hinted at some personal punishment for keeping them in the dark. He visibly gulped, and started to relate Draco Malfoy’s identification. Needless to say, everyone was happy to hear such news. Especially Remus.

After the laughter, caused by the recounting of the last scene, died down, Ron talked, and surprised everybody once more. “Congratulations, dad. You’ll do fine.”

A startled Arthur acknowledged his son taking part of the conversation. He noticed the glance Ginny shot her brother, and answered. “How do you know, Ron?”

“Know what, dear? Did you forget something?” Molly was still demanding.

“Well, as the wizarding law states...” Arthur interrupted himself, seemingly at a loss for words.

“Well, better spill it, dad...” Fred started.

“...as Mom won’t be patient for long.” George finished.

Seeming to gather his courage before a free fall, Arthur finally spilled it in one go. “I’ll be Minister.”

That astounded everyone, except Ron, and Ginny, who was looking at Ron again, awe in her eyes. She was quite sure, now, that her brother was sometimes having glimpses of the future, or at least, of the true nature of things.

“I’m sorry? I think I didn’t hear correctly?” Molly tentatively asked.

Arthur explained. “When the elected Minister is detected as a fraud during the induction ceremony, he is stripped of the position, and can’t work in a Ministry position anymore. The Minister position is given to the second in line, regarding the percentage of votes. I was second, remember?”

“Dad’s going to be Minister...” started George in awe.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, brother mine?” answered Fred, equally in awe.

Molly, seeing the look the twins exchanged, quickly interrupted. “Young men, if you think you are going to abuse your father’s position, you are greatly mistaken.”

Everybody laughed at the disgruntled looks the twins were now displaying.

The next day, in a certain bookstore...

“Yes, dear, put all those ruddy books over here. I want to get rid of them, so we’ll have a discount sale soon. I’d rather have more books for the children. After all, the store wasn’t making much money anyway. I always wondered how dad made it through.” Mathilda Marshall ranted, while dusting the shelves that her aid Gabriel had just emptied of old tomes.

They had met at 8am, as promised, and had worked non-stop for a whole hour. Reluctant to accept his help at first, the plump woman was soon relieved of the work the two of them were doing together. At the end, they shared a hot mint tea in the back of the store. Gabriel still didn’t want to speak about the corner where the strange shelf was,

which the woman hadn't dusted as thoroughly as the rest. But he had questions, though.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Why, yes my dear, of course."

"See, I read that book you... I mean you father... well... gave me."

"Yes?"

"I found a reference, but I can't make heads or tails from it. Here it is."

He gave her a sheet of paper on which he had properly re-written the content of his ring. She frowned, then asked him to follow her to the counter, where she explained.

"You see, it appears that the reference uses the system made for technology-oriented books. See, here is the publisher acronym," she said, pointing towards the first part, "and here is the book number in the publisher's records." she finished, showing the second part.

She then took a book from under the counter. "This will help us. It contains the publishers, by acronyms, and lists their address and other interesting details. You don't think that we book sellers didn't have a catalogue of every publishers, now do you?"

Humming to herself, she glanced at Gabriel's paper, then went through the book, and found something. She frowned, though, and turned some more pages. And then some others, keeping a finger in the pages that she read. Finally, she looked up towards an anxiously waiting Gabriel, and explained.

"The reference you gave me must be very old, because the publishing house had been dismantled a long time ago. Their name was Wilson and Turner. This catalogue had an entry on them, though, even if I never heard about them before. They had been bought back

by another publisher in the seventies, and then by another, a few years ago. The publishing house that may advise you, though... I'm not sure if they are going to be of any help."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... they don't have any reference at all. You see, in that column," she points somewhere in the book, "you can read the number of references available for a given publisher. And it states zero."

Gabriel was stunned. He wanted to know, and felt that his past was calling to him through the ring. Sighing, he asked. "I'll go there and ask anyway. What's their name and address?"

"I'll write it down." and she wrote the publisher's name and address on the paper that Gabriel had given her.

Gabriel thanked her, before taking his leave. Once in the street, he threw a glance at the paper before stowing it in his pocket. The name wasn't speaking to him at all. Who was this Lucius Malfoy anyway? Hogwarts, Headmaster office...

"Thank you, Minerva."

"My pleasure, Albus. I'll let you take possession of your desk once more, as I'm sure you want to replace all your items correctly." Her arm moved to encompass the desk where Dumbledore's trinkets had been moved around for her to work efficiently while he was away.

"Ahem... Minerva, we have only a few days before the start of term, but I have a few things I have to suggest, and discuss with you. Did you plan something today?"

"Today? The whole day? That must be serious, Albus. Well, I don't have anything... I mean, well... never mind, go ahead." She was blushing now, something any mischievous student would kill to have a picture of.

“Okay. First things first, were there any significant problems during my leave?”

“Apart from the signing and form-filling, only the Granger’s Notifier going off. Severus accepted to go there, and, as he didn’t report, I don’t know of the result.”

“Well, he was quite taken by myself at some point. We should ask him later. Anything else?”

“No.”

“Well. Did you find the work daunting? Unbearable? Tiresome?”

“It wasn’t daunting nor unbearable, as I knew of some of it before. But it was sure tiresome. Why?”

A silence. Then he spoke again.

“Would you mind doing it again?”

“Anytime you want, Albus, just tell me beforehand, and I can replace you for a week or so...”

“ No, Minerva. I wanted to know if you could replace me permanently.”

“Oh. Oh! Albus! You wouldn’t...”

“I’m tired, Minerva. The whole summer wore me down so much that I could sleep for a week, if I had the leisure. I could assist you doing it, of course. Besides, I don’t know of anyone being more qualified than you are, and who would know this school more than you.”

“Are you certain, Albus? I mean... are you going to cope being placed in the background? Knowing you, you will come to haunt me at times, surely.”

“I wouldn’t miss that. But I’m sure. I could take over your teaching, until you find another and younger teacher.”

“Oh, that’s right, I didn’t think of that. Poor students...”

“Poor students?”

“Sorry, Albus, I didn’t say that about you. Well, perhaps...”

“Hey!”

“Just joking.”

“I didn’t know you could joke.”

“It sure comes with the job of Headmistress. I hope you don’t lose that trait, though.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Now that it’s settled, did you have other things to discuss about?”

“In fact, yes. Do you remember the letter I found from Harry’s parents? It cleared Sirius Black from his wrongful imprisonment, and, as I told you I wanted to add a course in physical education, I wondered about asking him to teach it.”

“Albus, you can’t be serious! You want me to recruit Sirius Black in the staff? He was a Marauder, for Merlin’s sake!”

“ I know, but I don’t actually want anything. You are the Headmistress now, and you’ll take the good decision, I know it. Besides, from what Remus told me this morning, he came out of hiding and ate dinner with the Weasleys yesterday. He’s going to heal from his incarceration, but I felt the human contact will help him to do so.”

“Hmmm... yes. And you told me also that Remus Lupin wanted to teach?”

“Yes. I thought he would do fine in teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts. Even despite his unusual condition. I have something to tell you about Severus, too...”

“Yes?”

“He had asked several times to teach Defence, and I refused each time. Do you know why?”

“Well... I thought he was under-qualified in the field. I never saw him in a duel, though.”

“He’s not under-qualified at all. But he never told me his real reasons for wanting the position. He always spoke about giving the students a chance against the external world, which was tugging at my heart, but I know he was lying about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, but I could have given him the position if his motives had been truthful, so, if he asks you about it, if you could take that into account...”

“I’ll do, Albus, thanks. Thanks for him, anyway. I wasn’t going to give him a chance, believing that you never did.”

“Well, then...perhaps we are finished?”

“Actually, Albus, I wanted to know about young Malfoy... well, even if he’s not young anymore.”

“Do you know about what happened during the Minister induction?”

“Yes, I have been told about it. I was more asking if he was going to continue his education.”

“Obviously, he can’t continue here at Hogwarts. Not only because of his advanced age. Let me tell you some of what transpired about him.

When he was to be inducted Minister, we made him drink a potion which restored his mind to its rightful state, nullifying all mind-altering effect that was on him. And we found something disturbing. All his life, from a young age, his father had repeatedly obliviated him. Lucius was forging his son under his will, and the boy’s mind had never been right. It might even have disturbed Alastair’s judgement.”

“Alastair?”

“The Sorting Hat.”

“You mean the thing has a name?”

“Yes, and a fiery personality too. You should put it on, someday, to have a chat with him. It’s quite instructing. Well... where was I?”

“Young Draco being obliviated and his sorting.”

“Ah, yes. When he took the potion and retrieved his mind, he asked for immediate protections, and the persons of his retinue were furious. Nott and MacNair even drew their wand towards him, but several Aurors present arrested them.

In a more private setting, he then proceeded to tell us everything: the Malfoy allegiance to the Dark Lord; the names of numerous influent wizards under Voldemort’s thumb; even the name of some shops in Knockturn Alley that are doing illegal and dangerous business. The Ministry had insight about all his revelations, but he confirmed it all. Needless to say, with Arthur Weasley as Minister, and...”

“Arthur Weasley? Albus, I didn’t receive the Prophet here...”

“It’s not in the Prophet yet. After Draco’s demise, he got the position, being the next one in the votes count. But he sure has the intention of straightening the Ministry. He even told me that his son was to

rearrange and simplify the laws concerning magical creatures. I recall both Arthur and Percy started in the Creatures department, and they know about that stuff better than I do.

To continue with the story: Amelia Bones has been given free reign of arresting, interrogating, and imprisoning the disclosed Death Eaters, I'm sure Voldemort's ranks are now very reduced, in numbers and in power. We even got the address of places where he resided at some point. Some Aurors are keeping a tight watch on them.

Arthur, Amelia and I decided that we could disclose the names of the imprisoned Death Eaters, but not the ones who hadn't been caught. I don't want some self-righteous wizard to check on them and die because of it. After all, most of the Death Eaters are supposedly better in fighting than the average wizard."

"Why didn't you ask Severus, or Fudge, for this information, Albus? And why didn't we try to imprison Lucius earlier? After all, the man was quite a nuisance, since as long as I remember him."

"Well... Severus gave me a list when Voldemort fell, twelve years ago, and we have arrested many of them straightaway. But some house had been booby-trapped, and several Aurors died in the capture wave. The information provided by Draco proved that the list was also out-of-date. And Fudge didn't know many of them, only the most politically influent.

About Lucius... it's partly my fault. When he was younger, I always thought that he would correct himself, but, after he graduated, I noticed that, instead of bettering at the contact of others, he was worsening them. At that time, though, I couldn't do anything, because he was already corrupting many politicians. I owe my continued existence and Headmaster position to the fact that I was already Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot at that time. Why do you think I kept that annoying position?"

"Because you like meetings with decrepit wizards and witches?"

"I didn't you could joke with that, Minerva."

“You still don’t know me very well, Albus.”

“I agree. Still, I don’t know anyone that would know better than I am.”

“So true. Now, can you continue with the story? I have the feeling it’s not finished.”

“We didn’t try to bring Lucius to a trial because of his political power. I’m not sure if the current heads of the Ministry would have cooperated, and the few that would have, would have been killed in a random accident. I didn’t want that either.

After naming the Death Eaters he knew, young Draco told us that his father died in the library, without them knowing who did it. His mother forced him to drink the aging potion and to take his father’s role. She has been arrested also.

Then, understanding his state in the wizarding world, he asked for his Manor to be put under the Fidelius charm. I am too tired tight now to cast the charm, especially on such a large zone, and I’ll have to wait until next week, but, thanks for you taking my position, I’ll manage. I put some anti-apparation charms on the place, though. It should at least be somewhat safe.”

“I’m saddened to hear that he had been mentally abused for so long, Albus. We didn’t even notice anything!”

“Perhaps we should try to be more observant in the future. With more free time, I sure will, don’t worry about that.”

“You sure will. And, Albus?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks. For everything.”

“You are much welcome.”

To be continued in next chapter: Back-to-school Rush...

The dark side's champion got whipped,  
While the light one got equipped.  
What happens next? School, you ask?  
Yes, but review... ease my task.

## Chapter 13 – Back-to-school Rush

Gabriel looked left, and right. And entered the shop.

He had wanted to go in the city, to fetch the book from the downtown address Mathilda gave him. Grace hadn't objected, but had thrown him a curious look, as if to determine if he was telling her the whole truth. Still, she lent him some money so that he would be able to travel and buy the book, which price wasn't known yet. Envisioning a long trip in the Underground, he had also taken his sketchpad to draw some more.

When he had exited the target station, he had looked around and had quickly gone towards the given address. The place was quite classy, and he hadn't wanted to be arrested for showing his scarred face in the area, even if he consciously knew that couldn't be done. And, going there and passing through back streets, he had stopped in front of a tattoo parlour, attracted by the pictures displayed on the outside.

There, right in front of him, had been a drawn bird, similar to the ones he had been sketching for some time, beside the castles and snakes. Not able to let the opportunity pass, he had decided to inquire about the bird, and entered the shop.

Once inside, he reflected that it wasn't less classy than the whole area. The shop keeper, a young man with both arms covered in tattoos and displayed proudly through a sleeveless vest, took his general appearance in, and frowned. Gabriel wasn't clad in expensive clothes, and didn't seem to belong there. Shrugging his feelings of uneasiness aside, he went to the counter with his sketchpad opened, and, showing the bird, asked about it.

“Excuse me, sir. Do you know the name of such birds? I saw one on your outside display...”

The young employee looked towards the pictures, and merely nodded, reluctantly answering. “It's one of the many representations of a phoenix. Being mythical creatures, they don't have a fixed representation. Now, are you going to get a tattoo or not?” The man obviously didn't think so as he turned back without even waiting for

an answer. Sensing that he wasn't wanted, and that the displayed prices were higher than everything he could muster, Gabriel turned around and left the shop.

He couldn't refrain from thinking about how he would like to have a tattoo of a phoenix someday, and that thought kept him occupied until his feet found the entrance of a small office building, shared by several companies.

Its front was old-fashioned, true to the upscale environment, and the ornate buttons, obviously added after the building construction, followed its style. Finding the one labelled 'M. Books' as indicated on the address, he wondered how a publisher could afford working in this area while having actually no reference of book to sell. Not undermined by the thought, though, he pressed the button. To the voice that answered curtly, he announced to be searching for a book, and gave his identity, before the door clicked open.

Once inside, he found his way easily and arrived in front of a young woman dressed like women were in the previous century. While finding it strange, he reflected that people could dress the way they wanted, and he gave her the paper with the book references on it. She read it and, frowning, asked where he found the reference. He had rehearsed his part, though, and smoothly answered that it was from his grandmother inheritance. She went to the back, and, hidden from his view, seemed to turn pages from large books. She then made what could be heard as a telephone call, with the speaker enabled. While not hearing everything, Gabriel understood that she was asking that he be allowed to visit some place. After that, the young woman came back to the counter, and returned the paper to him.

"I don't know if they have it anymore, because their library has had a little run-in by some vandals at the beginning of summer." she said, before adding doubtfully "Or so I was told." Sighing, she continued explaining "But you are going to meet Mr Draco Malfoy himself, and I'd suggest you to be... polite, because he's easily upset at the moment."

The name was sounding vaguely familiar, but he couldn't decide if it was 'Draco' or 'Malfoy' that rang the bell. When he nodded his acceptance, she opened the counter so that he could pass through, and let him through passages with more books on more shelves. He idly reflected about the fact that their indicated number of references was zero whereas there were so many books, but he didn't have to go deeper in his thoughts, because they arrived in front of a closed door.

She knocked it in a peculiar way, and waited. The answer came, with the same sequence of sounds, and she opened the door. Behind the door, a tall, blond man with piercing grey eyes was waiting, dressed in a black garment which was as out-of-fashion as the woman's, and holding a cane in his hand. Seizing him up, the man then turned on his heels, and the woman pushed Gabriel to follow him.

They were in a library. But this one wasn't little. It wasn't medium-sized. It wasn't even large. It was more huge than anything else. The place suddenly gave Gabriel the creeps, but he reasoned with himself that he wasn't to be afraid of the mere size of a room. Even if said room seemed to be too large for the building he entered. He would have to check the neighbouring buildings upon getting out of there, he thought.

There had been damage in the room, it seemed, as several broken shelves had been put upright against the wall, and many books still littered the floor. The Malfoy man had taken a little advance, and had turned around the next shelf. He then uttered something, and, when Gabriel and the woman turned around the corner, he had a wooden stick in his right hand, and a book in his left. He stored the stick away, under the watchful gaze of Gabriel, and started to browse the book, raising his eyebrows as he went. The stick was tugging at another unknown memory of Gabriel, and, unaware of speaking aloud, he asked "Is this one of a kind?"

Startled by his own voice, he looked up to the astonished faces of the two persons in front of him. The man answered, displeasure evident in his voice. "What do you mean?"

“Sorry sir, I didn’t want to say it aloud, I swear. I just wondered about your stick.”

“My... stick?” The man looked stunned this time, until understanding dawned on his features. He drew the stick back from where he was keeping it, under his black vest, and held it upright in front of Gabriel. “This?”

“ Yes. It’s... beautiful.” Gabriel was surprised by his own astonishment in front of a mere piece of wood, and was beginning to feel ashamed.

The man looked towards him for a short while, a mix of discomfort and curiosity in his features, before turning towards the woman. “You brought a muggle here?” The term had been heard by Gabriel at some point already, but he still didn’t know what that meant. The way the man was spitting it, though, was a good indication of how bad it was. “He saw me?”

“I didn’t know sir! He pressed the button, so I thought... they can’t see it, normally... but I’m quite sure he didn’t see you, sir...” She was apologetic, wringing her hands together.

“ Well, we’ll have to see about that button someday. In the meantime...” Looking intently at Gabriel, he stowed the stick away again, gave him the book, and asked, in a silky voice that made Gabriel’s spine tingle. “What can you read from this?”

Gabriel first glanced at the book title, and was stunned to find it written in what appeared to be a foreign language, unknown to him.

Osiianpoc u oneGnTr , aae Sntvbh

Opening the book, he saw that it was written the same way, and appeared to be only utter gibberish. He turned the pages, one after the other, and couldn’t make out a single word. Strange. But, closing the book and looking at the back cover, he saw that it was the book he wanted. The cover displayed the publisher acronym and the book number, and they compared with the ones from the ring. Gathering

his courage, he spoke in a strangled voice. "I can't read it, sir, but I got its reference through an inheritance. I would like to have it, as a souvenir of my grandmother. I can pay..." he gathered his money, minus what was necessary to come back with the Underground and a few spare coins, and continued "...20 pounds for it."

At the mention of the British money, the man's face displayed a mix of emotions. Disbelief, anger, discouragement, pain, and longing. He then turned away, and without looking at them, spoke to the woman. "Do it."

The woman shuddered, and beckoned to Gabriel, and they went back to her office. There, she took the pound notes, looking at them fascinatingly, before storing them in a drawer. Catching a glance there before she slammed it closed, Gabriel didn't see a banknote at all, apart his own, only coins with golden, silvery, and bronze colours. Something was strange there, but he wasn't to interfere with the woman, and besides, he had found the book. Still wanting to know something, though, and having his only chance for an answer in front of him, he asked. "I'm sorry, but... what's a 'muggle'?"

"Oh, right, I forgot. I can't exactly let you talk about this to the other muggles, can I?" Sighing, as if about to do something she didn't like, she extracted another stick from inside her left sleeve.

Another stick!

Gabriel suddenly understood that there were more than one. He understood that each person could even have his own, except that you had to have a 'talent' to get one. He started to understand everything and his eye was opening, opening...

"Obliviate."

He found himself in the street, with his book in hand, and unclear memories about how he arrived there and how he got it. Frowning and trying to remember, he got the idea that he bought it from the local bookshop, and that was all. Clutching said book against his chest, he started to walk away in the sunny day, and returned to the

fair. He didn't notice the woman at the window behind him, looking at him until he turned away.

Once back home, he prepared the dinner, and put four plates on the table, as Grace had invited the Freyrs once again. Before he had left, just after lunch, she had told him to be there at least for dinner, and that they had to talk about something important. Now that the pastas were simmering in the water, he could only ask himself what was the topic, and what was its importance.

Grace arrived back from the show, right on time, and was followed by their friends. They ate in good company, and enjoyed the meal. Once finished, though, around the steaming tea, Grace asked him something.

"Well, Gabriel, we have been two months together by now, and I wanted to know what you were planning to do now."

"Now?"

"Yes, you know, September, and all this sort of things."

"September?"

"Well, for once, the fair will be less used, opening only on holidays, and the people are going to work outside. And there is the question of your schooling."

"Schooling?"

"Yes, schooling. As a young man of 15, you have to continue your schooling for at least one year. Unless your goal in life is to repeat the last word of every question you are asked, like you are doing right now. You are doing it fine, by the way." Even if the final comments were humorous, the subject was not.

"But... I don't remember... I mean..." Gabriel was paling now. He had always thought to be able to continue working for Grace, at the fair.

“What don’t you remember?” Joan asked softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. She knew that it was a touchy subject, because he had seldom spoken about his past.

After a while, Gabriel shuddered, and began to cry. She hugged him, and he started to whisper.

“I... don’t... remember... anything!” He sobbed a few times, then, in a subdued voice, he started to explain that he didn’t have any memory of before that summer, except from a few disconnected, and therefore useless, fragments. In a strangled voice, he even admitted not really knowing his real name.

To say that the others were shocked was an understatement. Here was a young man they spent two months with, and they didn’t know he was amnesic. Well, Joan had been suspecting something, but not so deep. Grace suddenly understood about his drawings and his furious quest for strange books, as it had to be a sign of his past calling for him. It was a good sign, though, because the books could indeed help him. But if his past inflicted him his scars, she was wary of him finding out without their emotional support.

They talked until late in the night, the teenagers still cuddling on the couch, and decided that, for the ongoing year and until Gabriel remembered sufficiently to survive on his own, he was going to live with Grace, in her little house in a middleclass suburb. He was also going to go to class with Joan, on the local high school. They tested his knowledge a bit, and they were a bit disappointed to find that he didn’t have any of the usual knowledge of teenagers of 15. Reflecting about that, they didn’t even know his real age. He was intelligent, and thoughtful, but he lacked some educational facts. They didn’t know if these lacks were because of his amnesia or not, but he would have to join Joan’s year instead of a higher class. She was two years younger than he thought he was, but the fact that they were going to have class together didn’t disturb them at all, to say the least.

When Gabriel went to sleep that night, he reflected about the day and especially the evening. While he had been ashamed at admitting his

amnesia, he was relieved that they took that bit of information well. And now, he was ecstatic about the incoming term. He would live with Grace and go to school with Joan! Things couldn't get better, he thought. He just had this hunger he couldn't sate...  
Hogwarts' Great Hall, September 1st...

The Hall was full. Only two students were missing. But for every person present, these students represented both sides of a constantly running war. And, without them being present, the relations between students were more subdued.

Something else was quieting the students. There had been rumours around the magical world, about the political manoeuvres around the Minister position, and lesser ones about the teachers of Hogwarts. As it was, the Sorting held less interest for the older students than the faces of the teachers on the staff table.

Except when one of the newly arrived students took place on the three-legged stool. Almost everybody gasped, as the features of Megan Prunner were noticed. The shy girl's hair was jet black and messy, and her frightened eyes were of an intense green. It was as if a younger and female version of Harry Potter was sitting there.

Mere seconds after being put on her head, the Sorting Hat yelled 'Gryffindor!' but no one cheered for a moment, while the girl looked at her new House table with fear etched in her features. She had seen the other students being cheered, and was starting to feel cast out, and she reminisced the circumstances of her presence here.

The whole experience had been unreal for her, from the start. An only child, she had been raised by her wonderful parents, John and Emily Prunner. On the summer of the year of her eleventh birthday, she had received a letter. And what letter! It had been crisp, like an official one, and the seal had been made with real wax, not a printed one. As soon as she had had it in her hand she had delicately opened it, and read the letter to her stunned parents. As it was part of the message sent to the muggleborns this year, they called someone for explanations, and a young witch visited them. She informed them about magic in general, the school, and the kind of life awaiting

Megan. She also explained that, their daughter being magical, it could clarify some unusual previous happenstances. Their eyes had lit at the explanation, and they sent the acceptance letter immediately afterwards. The young witch had also proposed to accompany them for their first shopping trip to Diagon Alley, something that they all enjoyed.

While she thought about that, a boy suddenly stood from the middle of the Gryffindor table, and clapped to her, quickly joined by a girl. Soon, the entire table joined the applause, and she warily sat at the table. She hadn't been cheered and was trying to hide her disappointment while smiling at them, trying to avoid the openly curious gazes. Feeling someone rushing to her side, she turned brusquely to see the red-head girl who had applauded first.

"Hi," she smiled. "I'm Ginny Weasley, second year." She then bent towards her, grasping her shoulder, and whispered in her ear. "I'll explain everything after the feast. Just wait for me in the common room." She rose, and uttered ceremoniously "Welcome in Gryffindor" before leaving her, to go back with the boy. Noticing him, she remarked that they must be siblings, as they had almost the same tint of hair, and the same freckles. However, his strange gaze unnerved her and she turned back to the ceremony.

After a few more students, the Sorting was finished, the stool and hat removed, and Albus Dumbledore rose, the hall falling utterly silent.

"Thank you everybody, for your patience. Before we dig in the wonderful feast that will appear in a short while, I would like you to remember the two students that left us. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, both victims of their family ties."

The aged Headmaster stood still for a full minute, and nobody dared breathing a sound. Once done, Dumbledore continued on a lighter tone. "I have many important declarations to make, but I sense your growing appetite, so I'll wait after the feast. Dig in!" And the Feast began.

A short time after everybody finished their dessert, Albus Dumbledore rose once more. "Well. That was plentiful." A few laughs echoed through the room.

"First, as you may very well be aware of, we changed Minister over the summer. Cornelius Fudge has been demoted and imprisoned due to proven charges of Death Eater association. After the political cacophony that ensued, in which I'm sorry to have taken part, Arthur Weasley has been handed the position. I expect that there will be some changes in laws soon, for the better of course."

Some people cheered about Arthur Weasley's position, and some congratulated the Weasley siblings present. Percy was pleased of the attention, and was puffing his chest.

Dumbledore continued. "I also have the feeling that my usual start-of-year notices don't impress anyone, but I'll utter them nonetheless. The Forbidden Forest is forbidden, which means you cannot go there unless explicitly told so by a member of the staff. Harmful magic is prohibited anywhere and anytime. Well, except in the duelling class, but that will be on the teachers' discretion.

Mr Filch, our caretaker, has pinned on his door a loong" some laughs, while Dumbledore insisted on the word "list of items that are forbidden and that will be confiscated if found. Now that this is out of the way, something important." he shivered suddenly, aware of the ruckus that his announcement would cause. "This year, I have decided to resign from my position as Headmaster."

After a few seconds of stunned silence, almost all students rose on their feet, asking questions aloud, and shouting comments to each other. After they quieted down, Dumbledore continued. "I exchange my position with your former Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall, so she will continue my speech now." He sat down, as the newly-appointed Headmistress stood up.

"Thank you, Headmaster. I mean... Professor." she waited for the laughs to die down again. "I have the last of your announcements to make, concerning classes. First of all, there will be a new subject

taught at Hogwarts from now on, and it will be compulsory for all years, even if the schedule for fifth and seventh years will be lighter. Physical Education will be taught by a new Professor, recently freed from unjust imprisonment. Please welcome Sirius Black in his functions.”

When the polite applause and the shushed whispers died down, she continued. “Following a rather heated discussion with some of the involved Professors,” she looked straight at Severus Snape, who scowled back. She continued, “the subject Defence Against the Dark Arts will be split in two classes: ‘Duelling’, and ‘Wards and Detection’. Duelling will be taught jointly by Professor Snape and Professor Lupin, newly appointed here, too. Please welcome him also.”

Some applause later, she continued. “Wards and Detection, which encompasses, among other topics, Detection of Dark Arts, and basic Curse Breaking, will be taught by Professor Moody, over there.” The scarred face of Alastor Moody looked straight towards them, without any emotion on his face. At the pause made by the new Headmistress, the students felt forced to applaud, though it was more cowed than before.

“We are also thankful that Professor Snape will still teach Potions, albeit only to the upper years preparing their NEWTs, years six and seven. Professor Glassend will take over first through fifth years. Please welcome her also.”

After all introductions were made, the students followed the prefects towards the dormitories, and Hogwarts fell back in the routine of the school year.

A few days later, as the third years Gryffindors were having their first Duelling course, a teary Neville threw himself on Professor Snape and hugged him. Neville had started the year with a faraway look on his face, and everybody had noticed that he was owling more than once a day. They supposed that he had a girlfriend, and Ginny and Hermione remarked that he didn’t seem interested in Luna. However, when the boy went to a horrified Snape and cried in his robes, the display was too much for all of them. The room erupted in peels of laughter, and the Professor, awkwardly yelling warnings, couldn’t

bring some order back. Then, Neville looked up to him, and spoke in a broken voice.

“Thank you, sir. Thankyouthankyouthankyouthank...”

“Enough, Longbottom! What...” but the simple fact of uttering the boy’s name brought back memories from the rushed week, when he found Hermione, healed the Longbottoms, and prevented a political disaster. He never was acknowledged for it in the press, though. He didn’t want the fame and all. But he actually spent a whole day speaking with Neville’s parents, explaining everything that had happened during the time they went ‘out of their mind.’ Then, Neville had appeared, Snape having sent an owl to his grandmother to be back swiftly, and the boy had launched himself to the neck of his astounded parents. After all, it wasn’t a common sight to recover your decade-lost close relatives. Sensing that his presence was intruding, Severus Snape had left the room. Neville hadn’t had the time to thank him, and was doing it in the classroom, thus thoroughly embarrassing him. Not knowing what to do, he was staring menacingly at the laughing room, until his eyes fell on Hermione.

Hermione had spent the remaining of her summer in the hospital, unsuccessfully trying to turn her new addiction off, and he had visited her a few times. They hadn’t met in Hogwarts yet, but, knowing her, she would be knocking on his office door soon, to get information about research procedures. At the moment, though, she was smiling at the display of affection Neville was demonstrating towards his once-abhorred teacher and former Potion Professor.

Well... Professor Snape was still the Potion Master of Hogwarts and had to prepare almost all potions usable by the school, especially the Hospital wing. Thus, he was still having his greasy hair and the pale complexion he got for not liking the sun for so long. But the pleasure of having got the place, even if shared with Remus Lupin, was enough to make him almost civil. He and Remus shared the position, and they were teaching together to the advanced classes, actually demonstrating duelling techniques, whereas, for the younger years, they had split the classes and thus lightening each other’s workload. Severus would also teach Remus’ charges when the werewolf would

be 'out there,' once a month. The set-up, even if wary at first, had pleased them after some time, to the contempt of Sirius Black. Snape had even found large periods of free time in his schedule, and was planning to have an interesting year altogether. The NEWT years were always the most interesting and less stressful for a Potion Professor, because there were less students, and they applied themselves on the matter, generally brewing close-to-perfection potions. And they seldom wasted their potions on the floor, either.

Hermione's face was moving, bringing him back to the reality of the teenager hugging him and watering his robe. Neville hadn't let him go, and, short of pushing him away rudely, he didn't know what to do. Hermione was moving her lips exaggeratingly, though, and he strained to understand what she silently said to him.

'Pat...'

'...his...'

'...head.'

Pat his head? He would look like an idiot, and his surprised expression was telling that much to the Gryffindor resident genius. But she raised her eyebrows, and continued to talk slowly and silently to him.

'Com...'

'...fort...'

'...him.'

He was to comfort a teenage boy? He had never done that. He had never comforted anyone, as he never had been comforted himself. Still, short of injuring the boy, either physically or mentally because of a rebuttal, he couldn't seem to be able to extract himself of this. So, to his utter discomfort, and in front of an equally astonished classroom, if partly still laughing, he patted Neville's back, and quietly spoke to him. "Shh... It's all okay now."

At the sound of his voice, Neville looked up at him, and, finally realizing what he was doing, threw himself away. Tripping on his previously discarded schoolbag, he fell on his rear, still staring wide-eyed at his former fearsome Potion Professor. 'So much for being considerate' thought Snape, rolling his eyes. The class once again laughed good-naturedly at the humour of the situation, and even the Professor couldn't refrain his lips from curling a little, thus smiling towards Neville and, raising his head to meet Hermione's gaze, he nodded once to thank her.

In that class, Snape thought that he had to work from the start, since their previous teachers were so low-level, and he spent the rest of the reduced period teaching his class basic postures and wand care. At the end, the room emptied of chattering students, to his annoyance. He disliked babbling young people so much, that he had sometimes asked himself why he became Professor in the first place. Midday and the meal were approaching, though, and he collected himself and began gathering his stuff. He hadn't registered that one student hadn't left the room.

"Hmmm... Professor?"

Startled, he looked up to see the serious, albeit smiling, face of Hermione Granger. "Yes, Grang... I mean... Hermione?" He had begun addressing her with her given name at St Mungo, where they had spent hours of discussing magical theory and the discoveries of the elapsed century, but he couldn't think of doing it while in class. He was too attached to his credibility to do that. But, now that the class was empty, he went back to calling her Hermione. She giggled good-naturedly, though. Smiling, he couldn't refrain to pick up on that.

"You know, if you giggle that way, I might mistake you from Lavender Brown someday..."

"Oh no you wouldn't!" she tried to sound indignant, but she had sensed the humour behind the pique, and giggled again.

He chuckled. Of course he wouldn't. Before the summer, he had never seen her as anything else than a know-it-all, and had even made his best effort to rub it in her and her friend's faces. But now, having taken care of her at some point, and having discussed things with her, he had found that he liked her. He liked the independent spirit that pushed her to brew the Polyjuice Potion last year. She had told him at some point, even if he knew already because of the tell-tale cat aspect she got for a while from it. He also liked her stubbornness in work, which eventually got her ill, but, with proper guidance, she could be really brilliant. That is, even more that she was already, which was quite a handful. And he promised himself to take care of her. For example, knowing the addiction she caught following her illness, he had already started to research a less-addictive potion to act as a substitute to the Dreamless Sleep draught that she had to drink every night now.

A bit later, to the horrified glances of some students, who hadn't forgotten the pain-in-the-behind Potion Professor, he and Hermione exchanged pleasantries while navigating through the corridors towards the Great Hall.

The next day, having dropped Divination at some point, Hermione had a three-hour gap in her schedule, and she received a message through a school owl.

Miss Granger,

As you seem to have some spare time this afternoon, and as I do too, I'd like you to meet me in my office at one today.

S. Snape

Hermione was still wondering about her former Potion Professor. Since her stay at St Mungo, he had been more and more available and friendly, and had tried to quench her thirst of knowledge as much as possible. Still, that didn't negate the two years of abuse all Gryffindors, but especially Harry, Ron, and her, had endured in Potions. She promised herself that, even if he was more amiable this year, undoubtedly due to his new position, she would try to prevent more unjust treatment towards anyone.

Presenting herself at his office, she was a little startled to see him turning a ladle in a brass cauldron sitting in the remote part of the room. She then remembered that, as the local Potion Master, he had to brew potions. He went back from his work soon, and sat in an armchair in front of a coffee table. While she sat in another chair around the table, he conjured some tea for them both, and they spent the following three hours in deep conversation. It was something to teach a reluctant class about a dangerous matter, but with Hermione, he found that every little thing he said was listened, memorised, and filed for future use. It refreshed him, and she was learning something. She also had things to say.

At some point, he had wondered about her summer research topics, suspecting that she had been following several tracks at the same time, which wasn't very healthful, but was a common attitude when starting to research. He himself got stuck into inventing three potions at the same time. Not only didn't he sleep during that time, but he also wasted the potions. So, the first thing he told her was to focus. Even if the mind could consciously memorise several data sets at the same time, it wasn't able to invent more than one thing at a time.

He was curious about what her research, but he didn't ask before, because he hadn't wanted to bring back bad memories. Now, however, he sensed that she could open up on this, and asked.

"Hermione, tell me, what were you studying this summer? Knowing you, the homework was finished in June, so, what did you do afterwards?"

She blushed. Truth be told, she had finished her homework the first week of the vacation. She then spent half a week wondering what to do. Usually, during the summer, she visited museums and the like, but, with Harry's death unconsciously wearing on her, she had stayed at home. The first book she had opened, though, was about dark creatures, and she had randomly opened it at a page depicting a Dementor.

The fearsome soul-sucking guards of Azkaban had only one weakness: they could be chased away by a spell, called the Patronus

spell. The problem was that most wizards couldn't achieve the spell correctly, the caster having to focus on happy memories to do so, and the Dementor's effect effectively sucking these happy memories away. Her first topic of research, this summer, had been on a way to package emotions in containers. She had thought that, perhaps, it was possible to destroy a Dementor by sending it too much happiness? The evening when she went in her parents' kitchen to collapse at their feet, she had successfully packed her grieving feelings for Harry. The little crystal, glowing a dull grey, was still in her trunk. Reflecting about it later, she had thought that she merely re-invented the Pensieve, and it had saddened her somewhat, even if the content wasn't memories but rather emotions. The next step to test her theory would be to pack happiness and put the crystal next to a Dementor to see its effect. Perhaps it didn't even work at all.

Now, one could wonder why she would seem so intent in destroying the creatures that were guarding the wizarding criminals in check. It was because of a small note in the book, about the Dementors' ability to communicate. Obviously, they could communicate with each other, though nobody knew how, and nobody had expressed any interest in finding how. They had been assigned the job of guarding the prison island a very long time ago, and the knowledge of talking to them had been lost in time. The current wizarding population was very well, thank you, and didn't see the need to communicate with the creatures. She determined, though, that the first person to find how to talk to them would be able to give them orders. Having heard of Voldemort through the experience Harry went through their first and second year, she had shuddered on thinking that it could be the Dark Lord that would talk to them first. The only thing that prevented her from studying this was the mere absence of a Dementor close by. Well, reflecting about it, it was also a good thing not having a Dementor living in her house.

She told all that to Snape, who reflected it about for a moment, before acknowledging her efforts and congratulating her for her first success. He also proposed to help her. He hadn't thought about the Dementors that way before, and reflected that this kind of research could be very dangerous for a young girl. On top of that, any research report would be more readily accepted and widely spread if both their names were on it, rather than only Hermione's. The research

community was that way: if you hadn't a proven sponsor, they wouldn't want to discuss with you. Many young people, full of ideas and ideals, but failing to insert themselves in the system, finished their career glumly sorting papers in the Ministry, or any other low-level job.

At soon as she left his office to go to her next period, almost three hours after having entered it, he reflected alone. A short time after leaving the Longbottoms to their son, he had gone to the Headmaster's office, only to find that McGonagall was going to stay there definitely. His natural enmity with the Gryffindor Head of House had been quieted over the summer, and he really wasn't surprised about the decision anyway. Dumbledore had been there also, eyes twinkling, when he had asked for the Defence position. The new Headmistress had readily accepted, but warned him about the course changes. That elicited the aforementioned heated discussion, and he finally agreed to still teach NEWT level Potions, and to share the Defence chair with Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody. Even if he had had issues with the werewolf and his gang in his years at Hogwarts, and with the retired Auror while spying on Death Eaters, he could accommodate them if they could.

He also knew of the new Potion Professor, as Victoria Glassend had been a promising student in that field, some years ago, before orienting herself towards a career as a Healer. Well, her being pure Hufflepuff material, it was the most obvious choice. Still, if the girl had had ambition like a Slytherin, she would have achieved the rank of Potion Master. She had interesting ideas for the course, though, like the Ingredients Gathering outing scheduled thrice this year. For a short while, Snape wondered why he had never thought of bringing students to help collect commonly used ingredients. The answer was easy, though: he would never have associated himself with students for any task asked of him.

Sighing at the irony of his life, he sat at his desk to prepare his teaching course in Defence.

That evening, in the Gryffindor common room...

Ron and Ginny were playing chess, both tired. The start of term had been difficult for them also, with Hermione ignoring them, and people generally making fun of Ron's new dreamy attitude. After all, Ginny couldn't very well follow Ron to each of his courses when going to hers at the same time. She had to rely on Dean, Seamus, and Neville, but the boys weren't there all the time, and Ron had already been mocked in the corridors, and his school bag had already mysteriously disappeared twice. When they played chess, though, it was a little as if the old Ron was back a little, even if he kept losing to her. At least, when playing, his comments were centred on the game and not drifting anywhere. Except once, when he unexpectedly affirmed that Hermione would have trouble raising kids whose hair would be greasy and bushy. That didn't make any sense, especially as he hadn't spoken a word about her for a long time, and besides, his rook was in check. She snapped her fingers in his face to bring back his attention to the problem at hand, a gesture that she had been doing for quite a time now, so that neither Ron nor the people around took offence from it.

Ron was continually trying to push his rook out of the way by moving it as a knight, and the piece yelled at him before returning at its place, to his amazed eyes. Ginny sighed, and, disconnecting from the game for a while, reflected about her brothers. Apart the two oldest brothers abroad, from who they rarely got news, they all were in Hogwarts. Percy was being his usual self, bossing people around, but he had taken a lighter tone while doing so. That was perhaps due to his certainness of having a Ministry job after graduating. He still had to work for his NEWTs, though. The twins were always on the side of the room, complotting, but not having used their deadly inventions yet. They had also confided to her that they were bored about that, and the spur-of-the-moment oath they had taken was wearing on them. They couldn't shake it off themselves, of course, and weren't ready to ask the severe Headmistress to remove it. She would be too happy to let it in place, especially as they still had to work for their OWL exams. However, they wanted to joke and to laugh, and she decided that, in a way or another, she would help them. And Ron...

He had been caught, once, out of Gryffindor Tower after curfew, by Professor Snape. He had been speaking with Luna near the Ravenclaw quarters, and what they were saying didn't make any

sense to the Potion Master. Looking at them strangely, he had just told them off, and didn't take points. Ron had only told the story to Ginny, in his usual airy manner, and that had been three days afterwards. He and Luna seemed to hit pretty well, and Ginny initially thought that Neville would be jealous. But the boy had developed a better confidence in himself, surely because of his parents' recovery, and he had asked Parvati Patil, one of Hermione's dorm mate, out. She had accepted, perhaps due to his new tanned complexion, inherited from the African sun. They were often seen walking hand-in-hand, to the snickers of some spiteful students, mostly Slytherins.

Thinking of them, she reflected about their lack of aggressive action this year. She didn't have much experience in this, but the sudden absence of Draco Malfoy seemed to allow smoother relationships between the rival houses. And thinking about Malfoy always brought Harry in her mind's eye. Almost everything was, though, and it was difficult to concentrate, sometimes. Quidditch made her think about him, Ron and Hermione as well, and even the new girl, Megan Prunner...

She had explained her about Harry Potter and the eerie resemblance she had with him. She even showed her pictures of him to prove that. That had clarified the students' reaction to her, but the younger girl was still looked upon with open curiosity. Ginny had had to persuade Percy to speak up in the common room, so that, at least in the Tower, she wouldn't be looked as a strange thing. Still, Megan looked so much like Harry, and sometimes even acted like him, that she couldn't avoid thinking that she might have been his sister.

Ginny's thoughts drifted back to Ron, and she reflected about the similarities between his state of mind and Luna's. They even got the same interesting marks in Divination. She knew about Luna's because they were in the same class, and had heard about Ron's through Lavender, once. He had apparently predicted that someone would be hurt soon and Professor Trelawney tangled her feet in the drapes and fell no more than 5 minutes afterwards. Other times, they would talk about things not even their teachers would understand. Absentmindedly moving his bishop across the board, because Ron's rook had decided to move by himself, she decided to write a letter to Luna's relatives, to ask how they were coping with her attitude. She

hoped that at least some of them had their feet on the ground. She would ask McGonagall or Dumbledore about that tomorrow. Stifling a yawn before coming back to the present, she responded to Ron's last attempt of protection by putting her queen in place, and announced tiredly "Checkmate."

To be continued in next chapter: Surprise, Surprise...

At least, he got the pages.  
Now, I propose a challenge:  
If you translate the title,  
I'll post next part. No fiddle.

## Chapter 14 – Surprise, surprise

The Rush had passed, and Gabriel and Joan were now following the current of classes in the local high school. Most of the other students had welcomed him warmly, despite their first reaction of fright caused by his unusual appearance. Supposedly aged of 15, he also had gained some height during summer, and his face was still scarred. Some of the students, though, mostly from higher classes, continually tried to mock him and trip him, when no teacher was around. They had succeeded in making him fall down the stairs at some point, thankfully without breaking anything, but, since then, he was always moving around with Joan, to the snickers of these brutes. They had to be taught a lesson, though, he reflected, and his mind unconsciously tried to recover some of his forgotten information relative to pranks.

Joan had presented him to her circle of school friends, two boys and one girl, and they were generally seen together between classes, and tried to sit together during them. One of the boys had looked at him with apprehension first, and perhaps something like jealousy, but, seeing as they were going well together, the feeling had gone away after a few days. His name was Jason Asaloch, he was smaller than most, but muscular, and had brown hair and blue eyes, with a fair complexion. He was always dressed with good-looking clothes, although generally dark, and Gabriel learnt from Joan that his family, although upscale, had decided to put him in a public school, supposedly to teach him human interaction. After his first reaction, he hit surprisingly well with Gabriel. The other boy's name was Kevin Nockear, and he was quiet as a mouse. His twinkling grey eyes, though, even from behind his long black locks, showed that under the silent facade, the boy was clever, and not to be messed with. Even his tattoos proclaimed his independence, as he had an eagle on his left shoulder, and a badger on his right. Joan had told Gabriel that Kevin was always speaking about either advanced school material, or weird stuff, and the little time they discussed together proved that. Gabriel even got into an argument with him once, about the efficiency of cryptography methods. When not being with the whole group, he was always seen holding hands with the other girl of the group, Tamara O'Malley. She was beautiful, she was hot-tempered, and she was black. As her name suggests, her father came from a long line of Irish blacksmith. However, following the tendency, he had left the

place and had explored the world, under the guise of a travelling salesman for a large airplane builder. He had only settled and married her mother after several years, and was now working in an office in London. The five teens had different personalities, but were going well together. Their foremost problem was the local group of bullies that had dubbed them “the group of freaks” and that were unsuccessfully mocking the “adopted” one. Still, they didn’t dare attacking them.

Contrarily to what Gabriel had thought at first, the schoolwork wasn’t too difficult. He had to work harder than the others at first, though, because he didn’t remember many things of the usual knowledge people their age had. But he wasn’t dumb, and quickly caught on. They had a course in history, geography, and politics, where they learned facts and dates about their country and the rest of the world, and in which Jason excelled. The boy wanted to become a politician anyways, like both his parents, and he had also taken French and Spanish, unlike the others. They had a course in mathematics and another in physics and chemistry, where they made interesting experiments, and in which Kevin surpassed everyone in the group, even if Gabriel found himself catching up on him during chemistry experiments. The mere action of mixing reagents called to him, even if he didn’t know why. On the other side of the scale, Tamara almost always failed hers, strangely because the reagents never mixed correctly in front of her eyes. The leader of their group in English and literature was Joan, and Tamara outclassed them in physical education. They also had a period where they could use the library and its computers. All of them were not bad in all subjects, and even worked as a group to understand the lessons better. Even Phys. Ed. was worked, by running laps in the morning, around their neighbourhoods.

After the first few weeks of school, they decided to take a break, and to spend a leisurely week-end, together. Jason asked his parents to lend them their remote cottage near the lake, and they agreed once the five youngsters promised that nothing untoward would be done there. Jason’s parents even took upon themselves to propose that their chauffeur would drive the teenagers there on Saturday morning, leave, and bring them back Sunday evening. As it wasn’t very far, he wasn’t required of him to stay there, so they would be given free reign of the house, even if they had to call at some point Saturday evening

and Sunday morning. When they said that, they looked towards Jason in a peculiar way, undoubtedly putting him in charge, should anything go wrong. Jason was mature enough to understand that, and to act accordingly.

Kevin, though, told them afterwards that he was going to bring plenty of interesting activities. The mischievous gleam in his eyes when he said that warned the others that, interesting or not, these activities were going to be weird. As usual. Joan and Gabriel decided to bring some food, even if Jason assured them that the pantry was always full. And Tamara reminded them to pack some swimsuits and sport garb, in the case they wanted to do some outdoor activities. At the pointed look of Joan and the question of rain, she shrugged her shoulders and answered that anyone could bring a book or two, also.

And they were gone. The 1-hour road trip passed uneventfully, and they arrived, unloaded their stuff, and prepared the place for the week-end. As they were his only non-school books, and as he hadn't had any time to browse them since school started, Gabriel had taken his three books, about puzzles, cryptography, and the one that seemed full of gibberish. Having the three of them in his hands, though, he had had an interesting thought. Was the whole book written using cryptography? He had then decided to give it a try, to attempt to decipher it using each listed method and to find if one was working. That evening, he hadn't slept until the first hours of the morning, unsuccessfully trying method after method.

Now that they were on site, they first decided to take a dip in the nearby lake, still warmed by the summer sun. Gabriel was a little shy about his pale and scarred body, but, as everybody else was freely going, he decided to follow suit, even if the shining sun was annoying him greatly. They spent a few hours bathing, splashing each other, and generally relaxing and having fun, with Gabriel trying to stay in the shadows of the shore's trees. He also remarked that Tamara, while being as playful as the others, didn't seem to like being in the water, as she spent most of her time on the drifting raft. After this, being hungry, they prepared something to eat and enjoyed a meal on the lake shore. To spend the time afterwards, as they wouldn't go in the water on a full stomach, they brought out their books and began

to read, sometimes offering comment about their novel to the others. Only Gabriel didn't say anything, as he was busy writing numbers on his sketchpad, trying to compute the book's code. As he didn't say anything for a while, Kevin got curious, and, when Gabriel didn't react to his questions, he went up and silently approached the still scribbling teen. Then, with mischief in his eyes, he grabbed the sketchpad from him and ran around the place, quickly followed by an angry Gabriel, to the laughter of the others. When he saw that he was being had, Gabriel stopped, and, blushing, went to collect his books, while Kevin curiously parsed through the drawing pad. When he stopped, staring, Tamara wondered why and went behind him to see the page. She gasped, and that attracted everyone's attention. They all saw the first drawing that Gabriel had made about Ginny Weasley.

Jason and Tamara began asking who she was, while Kevin was turning the pages and gawking at the other pictures, especially the one on the broom. Joan, though, sensing the approach of the topic of Gabriel's failing memory, tactfully turned the conversation towards the end of the sketchpad, full of numbers. That earned her an inquiring look from Jason, who was sufficiently tactful himself not to raise the subject there and then. Gabriel showed them his books, and explained that he was trying all cryptography methods to decrypt the third one. That got Kevin interested, and off the hook about the drawn girl, for which Gabriel was thankful. He and Kevin spent the rest of the afternoon in deep discussion about how to adapt the different codes to decipher the book. But they still hadn't any success. Just before eating, though, he asked Gabriel if he had the smallest hint about what code to use. Reflecting about that, Gabriel brought up the page where he had written the ring's content. Still nobody had asked about it, and he hadn't raised the subject himself either. Looking at the small and obscure line, and after Gabriel had explained that the first part was only the book reference, they reflected silently for a while, before being called to eat.

During the meal that followed, they both went silent, until Kevin stood up suddenly, and, taking the sheet, showed it to Gabriel. There, his finger on the 7Transpose word, he asked him if that could be the code they were searching, a standard transposition method with the specified key number 7. Gabriel, his mouth full of potatoes, could only nod enthusiastically. They were suddenly interrupted by the annoyed

tone of Joan, who, backed by Tamara and Jason, told them to stop separating themselves from the group on this week-end. At the notion of group, Kevin's eyes lit with mischief again, and, returning the paper to Gabriel, he returned to his place and explained what he had prepared for that evening.

Kevin introduced them to a game he had started to enjoy during the summer. These were called role-playing games, and the one he brought had the Middle Age for setting. In these games, he informed them, you have to play a character which is defined through talents and skills. At some point during the elapsed year, Jason had watched a television report that wasn't kind on these games, but Kevin assured them that, mature as they were, they wouldn't have problems of identification. They spent two hours getting to know the game, create basic characters, and play a short introduction game. Kevin was directing the game, thus didn't play a character, and the others had had to choose and personalize a character from a set of predefined ones. There were simple ones: the footman, the doctor, the thug, the knight, and the peasant. There were also some characters which were more difficult to play for beginners: the martial artist, the wizard, and the saint. However, Kevin warned them about the difficulty of playing a complex character for a first game, and they all chose simple ones. Tamara chose the thug, Jason chose the knight, and Joan chose the doctor. Gabriel, though, had trouble keeping his eye off the advanced characters. Without knowing why, he couldn't settle on anything else than the wizard. Reflecting that he perhaps played that game before, without knowing it, he took the character sheet, and began to browse through the accompanying books to learn what his character's skills were. The game they played was quick and easy, but Gabriel wasn't satisfied of his character, weirdly thinking it was hollow in a way.

After their characters had quickly dispatched the last monster of the game, they weren't tired, and Kevin hesitated before telling them of another interesting activity. Curious about his hesitation, as he was rarely cautious, they asked him about it and he set them around the table, while he got out of the room to 'prepare.' When he was back, he was dressed like a madman. Or a Middle Age wizard. Or both. With a haughty look, he took place at the table and put a glass ball on

it. Saying that the crystal ball was going to help them sort through their many questions, he started playing the medium.

The others, minus Tamara, who already knew of her boyfriend's habits, were amazed at the play. Unknown to them, the glass ball that he was using like a divination crystal ball was tricked to display translucent and colourful swirls of smoke on the mere touch. They played like this for a while, asking random questions in turns, with the self-dubbed medium answering through the ball. After some time, the light table itself was raising in the air to indicate that spirits were participating to the game. Looking to his face, it was obvious that it was Kevin that was holding it, but they enjoyed the show nonetheless. After a few turns, Kevin got another accessory from his pocket, accessory tricked to be used together with the crystal ball for more interesting effects.

And Gabriel froze.

No one noticed this, as they were all looking at Kevin's wand. He started to move it in the air, its battery-lit tip showing off some colours in the darkened room. He also tapped the crystal ball with it, and the ball hummed and vibrated. They were all looking at the display, with mixed feelings on their face. Kevin was looking arrogant, but they knew it was a show, and they all saw the smug look behind it. Tamara looked proud. Jason looked a bit annoyed, even if he was following the show playfully. Joan was curious. And Gabriel was... in turmoil. His mind was screaming at him, but he couldn't understand. He tried to stand, looking fixedly at the wand, but failed and fell back on his chair with a loud thump, attracting the others' eyes. Joan, knowing that his mind wasn't stable, started to edge towards him to comfort him, but he stood again, successfully this time, and, in a choked voice, asked for the wand. He was unaware of everything but the wand, and his eye was open wide.

Not knowing his friend's exact state of mind, thinking that he was playing along, and not understanding the significance of it, Kevin just passed it around until Gabriel was holding it in both hands, transfixed in wonder. Being the closest to him, Joan noticed something that she would have difficulties to explain afterwards. Gabriel's eye was changing, its colour lightening. Again.

His eyebrows descended into a frown, as if trying to remember something very hard. He then looked at the table, and, pointing the fake wand towards it in a complicated motion, muttered two words in a voice that sounded younger and less raspy than he was used to.

“Wingardium... Leviosa”

To say that his friends were stunned would be an understatement. How could they not be? The table jumped three feet in the air, and the wand exploded in various coloured sparks, setting fire to the carpet and tablecloth. Gabriel then passed out and collapsed on the floor, his eye overturned, and the table fell back down, thankfully not hitting anyone because they had all backed away when it had shot up. Joan ran to him, trying to wake him up; Jason was too stunned to react; Kevin looked impressed, and Tamara...

Tamara was looking at Gabriel in fascination, before collecting herself. The fire was moving fast, and she looked around, noticing that everybody else was too stunned by the events to start moving, looking as they were towards the collapsed body of Gabriel. Sighing, and hoping that nobody would notice her, she spread her hand in front of her, and concentrated hard on the fire. She knew she was breaking centuries old rules, but she didn't have the time to get water or anything else, and everybody was still trying to register what had happened. The fire suddenly seemed brighter and 'turned' toward her, as if it was alive, before seeming to bow to her, and disappear, leaving the carpet and table intact. No ashes, no charred material, nothing. It was as if the whole thing had been an illusion of their senses. Apart from the destroyed wand, of course.

They looked to each other in fright at the episode. Tamara was frightened also, but because they might have seen her, not because of the fire itself. Like the others, she was still curious at Gabriel's display of unusual talent. She knew of people that could levitate tables, of course, but they generally did so without speaking or moving a stick like a wizard.

A wizard?

Could it be possible that the legends she knew about were true? Could it be possible that wizards existed? Was Gabriel one of them? If what she suspected was true, they would be as protective towards the outside world as them, and Gabriel wouldn't have cast a spell in front of strangers. She would have to explore that, and the first person to ask was Joan.

Joan didn't succeed in waking Gabriel, but noticed that he was sleeping soundly, as if recovering. She called for the others to get up and help her carrying him to his bed, and they did so, silently. They were too stunned by the display to even start trying to speak about it among them. Once he was tucked in his bed, his shoes removed, they all went to their respective beds.

The boys and the girls were sleeping in separate rooms, not being overloaded by hormones already and wanting to act proper should Jason parents come early in the morning like they sometimes did. When Joan and Tamara went to bed, Tamara couldn't refrain from asking her friend. "Joan?"

"Mmmm?"

"Is Gabriel a... a wizard?"

Not hearing the answer, she thought that Joan was already asleep, and started to drift herself, until the other girl spoke suddenly. "Tamara, there is something about Gabriel... which is not quite right. But I think that he'd rather tell the thing himself than being told behind his back. When he'll wake up tomorrow, he'll tell you everything. I don't think we should... build fanciful stories."

"Even after tonight's display?"

"Even."

The tone was final, and, guessing Joan's feelings, Tamara decided to keep quiet and wait for the morning to get some answers. She was even willing to share information, if that could give her insight about those fabled magic users! She went to sleep with dreams of damsels

in distress, knights in shining armour, fabled beasts, mighty castles, and powerful sorcerers.

The next morning found Gabriel waking up early, feeling feeble and wary. His memory still wasn't working well, and he didn't remember the previous evening immediately. After the compulsory toilet pause, he went in the kitchen to fix himself a breakfast. A few minutes afterwards, a sleepy Joan came also, and they greeted each other. Well, Joan greeted Gabriel's back, and he greeted the sizzling bacon and eggs.

"Hi beautiful," he said. He was feeling mischievous today.

"Hi... mysterious," she countered.

"Hey, I'm not! You know everything about me!" he playfully answered, turning back with the pan in his hand.

She went to serve herself a portion, when, looking at his eye, she gasped. Even if the previous evening had been almost forgotten, even if they all could state that it was an illusion caused by Kevin's toys, nothing could explain that Gabriel's eye was now a dull honey colour. Nothing.

"What?" he asked after having served them both, and taking her shocked expression in.

"Your... your eye!" she raised a trembling finger to point at it.

"What?" he didn't feel as mischievous as before, except if... "You aren't pulling my leg, are you?"

Not saying anything, she darted to the bathroom and came back with a small mirror. Looking inside, he saw that she was right. His right eye was a dull honey colour now, not light brown that it was before. Reflecting about that, he also remembered that his eye had changed before. Four months from now, after the dump episode, it was crimson, not even brown. Why was it changing? Sighing, he closed his eye, and wished that it was brown like before. He wished hard,

and felt a tingling in his eye. Opening it again to try to define the colour better, he got another shock, as well as Joan.

His eye was back to their light-brown colour!

They didn't have time to ponder that, though, because the others had woken up and were arriving in the kitchen, eyeing him warily. He went back to the stove, and made short work of putting more breakfast servings up.

Their silence was unnerving, and he didn't like that. Usually, Joan and Tamara were speaking about girl things, and he and the boys were arguing about technical stuff, like most boys do. Now, no one uttered a word, they were all eating silently, even Joan. Uncomfortably, he addressed them all.

"Hey guys? Cat got your tongues?"

After a silence, Jason turned toward him, and answered. "You don't remember, do you?"

That got him thinking. Of course, as a living example of amnesia, there were many things he didn't remember, but surely Jason wasn't speaking about that, because no one knew at school. He had wanted to tell them, but never found the proper time to do so. What was Jason suggesting?

"Errm... No?"

"You don't remember yesterday evening?" Jason elaborated.

That clarified his mind, and, instead of searching for long-lost memories, he inspected his immediate memory, and then frowned. Something had happened yesterday, but for an unknown reason, it had been classified as 'unreachable' by his unconscious mind. Problem was, he had had witnesses, and they were going to bring everything back. Sighing, he braced himself from the memory onslaught that he was going to experience, and told them his secret.

“I’m really sorry, guys. I wanted to tell you before, but I didn’t have time to organize my few thoughts.” He looked at them while speaking. Joan’s face was encouraging, Jason and Kevin were curious, and Tamara looked... happy? As if he just admitted having hold of a fortune and going to give her half of it. Well... sort of. Shrugging it aside, he continued, and watched Tamara’s smile fall at the same time he spoke. “I’m amnesic.” A stunned pause. “I don’t remember anything that occurred before this summer. I feel something really bad had happened, and I sometimes get flashes of memories, like the girl whose drawing you saw yesterday, but that’s all.” Feeling that he still had the biggest part to say, Joan stood up and went to hug him from behind, soothing him while he continued with tears on his face. “Guys, I... I don’t even know... if Gabriel is my real name. It’s... it’s so hollow, sometimes...”

After a long silence, he started again. “I don’t remember yesterday evening also, but I don’t know why. I feel as if it was a part of my long-lost past. I just remember choosing between the seven characters for the role-playing game.”

A silence. Everyone looked apologetic, except Kevin who was thoughtful. Then he spoke.

“Gabe? can we still call you Gabe?”

Gabriel nodded, smiling weakly.

“Gabe, have you seen a doctor? I mean, amnesia happens, and people often check this with medical care, I mean... their relatives bring them there.”

“You see, I awoke on a dump, so, I think that if I ever had relatives” he spitted the word, as if it was something bad “at one point, they sure didn’t want me. Unnngh!” He suddenly held his head and sat down on a chair, visibly in pain. After a minute, during which the others went to fetch him a tablet and a glass of water, he relaxed.

“Thanks, guys. I’m okay now. The very image of relatives...” he grimaced.

Sensing that he had been abused at some point, the others didn't comment or press him on.

"So, have you seen a doctor or not?" Jason asked.

"Well... no. I survived at first, and then found a place to work, and everything followed smoothly."

"If you don't want to see one, you know, there are alternative methods." Kevin said, matter-of-factly.

Joan answered. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes, with this problem, hypnosis works miracles."

"I don't want to be anyone's guinea pig!" Gabriel was adamant.

"Don't fret. You can also do it yourself, by meditating. You can try yoga, for instance."

"...or martial arts." Tamara followed, ever so intent on promoting sports.

Gabriel thought about it for a moment, before agreeing. "I'll try it then. Thank you guys."

A pause ensued, and everyone reflected about the events.

Thinking about one of Gabriel's previous sentences, Kevin frowned, and asked, "Gabe, can I ask you a question?"

"Well, you never asked before, so you can shoot at will."

"How sure are you that what you did yesterday connects to your past?"

“Hmm... pretty sure. I mean, I don’t remember it at all, and the same kind of veil is wrapped around it. It’s kinda hard to explain. I feel that I recognize the texture of my memory block, and it’s the same one.”

“Can you give me the seven character types?” Kevin asked intently. Tamara’s head shot up towards him, but he didn’t move, and she smiled. She had understood, and turned towards Gabriel too. Gabriel frowned, trying to recover his thoughts.

“Well...” Gabriel was starting to feel cornered, but the question seemed innocent and he answered “there was the knight, the footman, and the martial artist... the peasant, I think, and... the healer, the holy man, and the ruffian. That’s seven.”

“Gabriel,” Joan looked pointedly at him, trying to catch his attention, while Tamara was almost jumping on her seat with expectation, “Gabriel, there were eight types.”

“Eight?”

“You chose to play a wizard, Gabriel.”

“But... but...” he seemed lost “that can’t be!”

“Even if it was only a game, people generally choose for first character one that they feel close to.” Kevin also looked at him seriously. “You chose to play a wizard, Gabriel. And you chose to name him Harry.”

Gabriel fainted.

He awoke in a start, five minutes later, as Tamara was passing a wet cloth on his face. He was in his bed again, and the curtains were closed, casting an eerie darkness in the room. In the nearest room, Joan and Kevin were arguing, and Jason was there too, trying to calm the angry redhead. Gabriel didn’t give attention to Tamara at first, because the remote arguing seemed to be about him.

“You knew he was having memory troubles, and you pushed him nonetheless!”

“So what if I did? Wouldn't it be better if he gets himself back?”

“What do we know about him? What does he know? There is a reason he is that way, you know, and I don't want him to break down because of what he may remember.”

Gabriel tuned down the arguing, when he felt Tamara tugging to his sleeve. Looking at her, he was surprised to see a look so intent in her eyes.

“So, are you?” she asked.

“Am what?” he answered, his mind still trying to quell the memories.

“You know...” she neared him, and spoke so low that he had to strain his ears to hear her. “...a wizard?”

He looked at her, horrified. How could she utter such nonsense! “Wizards don't exist, Tam. They are only legends...”

Her eyes misted at this, and, looking over her shoulder, she extended her hand in front of her, palm upright. She knew she was breaking the old and unwritten laws again, but she was so curious about him that it didn't matter to her at that point. When he looked from her hand to her face, wondering about what she intended to do, he saw her look of intense concentration. The next thing he knew, a flame was emerging from her hand, lightening her face and his.

He jumped so suddenly that he almost knocked her over, and she lost her focus, thus putting the flame out. He was frightened of her now, and started to back away, until she whispered urgently to him. “Please, Gabriel! I know you'll find it weird, but there are people with strange talent around here. The others don't know about me yet.” She looked imploringly at him. “We don't know exactly about you either. Can you really, definitely, prove to me that you aren't... weren't... a wizard before the summer?”

He stopped and looked at her strangely, before answering. "You know that I can't. I don't remember anything."

"Yes you do! The girl that you drew. How comes she was flying on a broom?"

"It could have been a movie..."

"How comes you can draw her so well and nothing else? You surely knew her better than that."

"Perhaps I knew an actress very well?"

"And perhaps not. Come on, stop making excuses! You spoke some weird words yesterday, and the table shot in the air, before catching fire!"

He looked disbelieving, then thoughtful. "Did I, really?"

"Yes! We all saw you."

"Well, if you say so..." he looked defeated, and Tamara was sure he was going to admit, until he spoke again. "...perhaps I did that yesterday, but, as I told you all, I have no memory of it, or from my past."

"Could you be an amnesic wizard?"

"I could, couldn't I? I can't disprove anything though. Although, if you utter a word of this outside us, I'll deny as strongly as I can."

"Perhaps we can work together."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to be one of the first to know about it if it's true."

“You know I don’t remember anything, right?”

“Yes, but when you’ll start to uncover it, I want to know.”

“Why?”

“Well... my people...” she looked hesitant for a moment, before launching, in a quick voice “I mean, those who can wield fire like me, and other things... I really shouldn’t tell you all this, they could get angry... you won’t tell anyone?”

“Okay, I promise.”

“Thank you. Anyway, we aren’t quite ‘normal,’ and, even for us, wizards are a legend. I want to know if it’s true.”

“What do you propose?”

She looked around, visibly fearful to be heard, before turning back to him “Information and explanation about my people. But it stays between us, only the two of us. Even Kevin doesn’t have a clue about it, even if I know he’d kill to know about it. Well... figuratively speaking, of course.”

He looked thoughtful for a long moment, before shaking her proffered hand “Okay, then. Only the two of us.”

They then got up and went to meet the others, who had calmed themselves during their dialogue.

Even if they had been more open, more interested, and generally friendlier than some people upon discovering Gabriel’s eventual talent, they had been wary around him for the remaining of the day, and everyone had settled for quiet activities. They had played card games for the remaining hours of the morning, and spent the afternoon reading.

Gabriel went back to his encrypted book, and, using the code Kevin had found the previous day, tried to translate the title, which he was still unable to understand.

Osiianpoc u oneGnTr , aae Sntvbh

Supposing that the text had been coded using the translation method with a 7-columns grid, like his friend had proposed, he calculated, from the 38 characters, that he was going to use 6 lines for his decryption table, and that his sixth line would contain only 3 characters. As one of the first books he had read, after waking up amnesic, was on the topic of cryptography, he was able to do so quite rapidly. Writing the letters vertically, and then reading them horizontally, he was stunned to be able to read something in proper English.

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‘On Transportation Devices, by G. Shaun.’ He wondered what it was about for a short time, supposing that it was about cars and the like. Still, why encode a book about cars? He began to translate the book, before quickly discovering that it was going to take a very long time. He even wondered about using the school library’s computers to help in this work, before deciding that, should the book content be dangerous, the less people knew about it, the better it would be. So, he focused on finding, and translating, the fifth chapter.

Working on it, he quickly found that, once he had the proper decrypting method, the translation went smoothly. Just when he finished deciphering the chapter, the afternoon was drawing to a

close, and a car could be heard in the courtyard's gravel. He had been so focused on translating the chapter that he didn't even try to read it at the same time. His sketchpad was full of grids of characters, and he didn't have place to work for more anyway. They all packed their stuff, and went to the car after having closed the house.

On the trip back, Gabriel browsed through the pages he had translated. For convenience's sake, he had written his translation under the book's lines of text. The text wasn't connected to any of his knowledge, so he rapidly found himself lost and unable to understand it.

## Chapter V – Activation by the Word

Unless its effect is going to be permanent (cf. chapter VIII), the charmed item must be activated by one way or another. In this chapter, we are going to see how to link a given word and the item...

What was a 'charmed item', anyway? Sighing, he closed the book, and looked gloomily through the window, reflecting about it. If he understood correctly, the entire book was about transportation devices that could be activated one way or another, and the chapter was about voice commands. 'Like the new computers that could be directed by voice,' he thought. But he didn't remember anything about including a microphone to the device, and found it strange.

The car dropped them at their respective houses, and they hugged each leaving person in turn, having decided that, despite the circumstances, they would do such a trip again in some time. Once safely arrived, Gabriel greeted Grace, and they ate dinner together quietly. Once in his small-but-cosy bedroom, he arranged his stuff for the following day, and lied on his bed, trying to sleep.

One hour afterwards, he still wasn't sleeping, as something was tugging to his mind, as usual. This time, though, he felt that the memory wasn't hidden, and that it was quite recent. Closing his eye to meditate on this, he found that whatever was eluding his mind was already in his notes, so he stood up, and gathered his sketchpad and the many sheets that he had used. Browsing through them, though,

he didn't find anything related to his feeling. Until he found the paper where he wrote his ring's inside text.

Pb:W&T;Bk:59237 – 7Transpose;Ch:5 – Act.W: p178,w248

So far, he had found the book, discovered the cipher used, and translated the chapter 5, on activation word.

Activation word...

His only eye suddenly opened wide upon his understanding. 'Act.W' meant ACTivation Word! If there would be an activation word for anything, he reflected, where was he going to find it? It was perhaps a word in the book itself after all... a given word... in a given page...

His eye lit up again. A word reference! He suddenly Got It. What else would be 'p178,w248' anyway?

Haphazardly throwing his notes on the floor, he got the book, and browsed it feverishly until he reached the indicated page number. As organization, or sheer luck, would have it, the page belonged to the fifth chapter, and he had already translated it. He counted 248 words, and arrived in the middle of a list of examples of 'usable' activation words. The activation word for a given item had to be chosen carefully because, when spoken, the effect was immediate, and thus, the list included weird and seldom-used words or even invented ones, like 'ambliotrophia,' 'nastly bernicles,' 'clankster duffins,' and... 'safehaven', which was the 248th word in the page. Gabriel counted twice, to be sure.

His heart beating at his discovery, he braced himself, and, still holding the book, spoke aloud.

"Safehaven."

To be continued in next chapter: Room Service...

That was one straight thread, for sure.

It had to have a closure.

Another cliffie... too bad.

Come on, review, don't be sad.

## Chapter 15 – Room Service

Hogwarts had spent the last weeks of summertime in a quiet and smooth manner, and was entering autumn the same way. Contrarily to the two previous years, no outstanding rivalry was staining the ambiance, and no dark lord had entered the premises. Yet.

Still, many changes had happened in the first month of school, and some of them were feeding the rumour mill quite well, while others were quite insignificant or unnoticed. Such facts low in interest for the students were Neville's raising grades in Herbology or Ginny's in Transfiguration.

Susan Bones' open hostility towards the Weasleys, though, was spoken about in the whole school, since the day it started, that is, the first day of school. Gone were the friendly glances towards Harry and his friends. The niece of the still Head of Magical Law Enforcement had been ecstatic that summer, about the incoming elections, and was sure that her aunt was going to win. She had bragged about it to all her Hufflepuff friends, and, despite the Malfoy interlude, when Arthur Weasley got the position, she couldn't accept it. Unknown to her, Amelia Bones was perfectly content with the situation, as the new Minister had the difficult task to reorganize the Ministry's legal shambles before any dark lord tries to take over. No one had spotted Voldemort yet, and she was busy with managing the Aurors and the Department itself. The Weasleys were mostly ignoring her, but Ginny and the twins were having a more and more defined target for any upcoming prank. That is, when they found time to plan pranks again, as the three of them were occupying the Quidditch pitch often, with the other members of the team.

Oliver Wood had started recruiting early, needing to replace Harry at the Seeker position. However, as it was his last year, he also felt that the team would be better prepared for next year if they had proper replacement players, so he held full tryouts for all positions. Besides, having a reserve team was always better for training, as it provided truthful opposition. Furthermore, it was his final year with his NEWTs pending, as well as the official beaters' and chasers' OWLs. If the reserve team was good, they could replace each other when the exam schedule would be too tight. One morning, the full Gryffindor

house has been outside, the older students only surveying the surroundings to prevent other houses' members spying on the tryouts. The first years were there as well, some of them disgruntled that they couldn't participate to the tryouts because of the general restriction on Quidditch for first years, which was still in effect. Even Hermione was there, even if only in the stands with a book in hand. Of the seventy three students, forty-one had been willing to try, and the tryouts had extended until the end of the day, but the team was now complete, and the reserve also.

Among the ten potential students for the official Seeker position, Ginny succeeded in grasping the Snitch eight times whereas Colin Creevey managed only five. The other ones barely caught it once or twice, and Ginny had been selected for the position. Her parents had been so proud that they bought her a new broom which they sent with a flurry of congratulations wishes. After all, with the salary of Minister, even reduced to proper amounts after Fudge's demise, they could at least buy some things for their children. The reserve team had been started with Colin as Seeker. A six year student named Joshua Stopper, with his appropriate name, got the Keeper position. He had been so good in fact, that, were Oliver not already official Keeper, he would have been. The beaters were, unsurprisingly, twins again: Andrea and Lucy McCullough, although very feminine fourth years, were large enough to send a bludger with almost the same speed and accuracy as the Weasley twins. And the chasers team consisted of Harvey Donaldson, a quick and nimble second year; Fredrick Hansen, a fourth year with a deadly accuracy; and, surprisingly, Ron Weasley. Even under everyone's doubtful glances, he had managed to play quite well. His strongest point, though, and it was soon clear to everyone, was his unpredictability. While that could be dangerous on the field, it could also bring them some points, as well as losing the opponents.

During the first weeks of school, Pansy Parkinson had tried, quite unsuccessfully, to take back the reins of Slytherin, left by Draco's departure. However, the cunning Blaise Zabini, annoyed of the constant prejudice Slytherin had been subjected to during the previous years, and with the help of the most influent older students, had already united more than half the house since even before September. The boy knew that they had to prove themselves to the

others, and, despite the good-natured house rivalry, since the start of term, there had been almost no aggressive action coming from Slytherin anymore. Of course, there were some exceptions, and Pansy was one.

She and her bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle often patrolled the corridors, trying to scare the younger or solitary students. They hadn't got over their family's imprisonment, and were, consciously or not, trying to exact revenge on Hogwarts students. They had been left out of the accusations and interrogations by the Aurors on the base that, not being 'of age,' they couldn't be held legally responsible of their actions anyway. Almost nobody knew that they were already in service of the dark lord. And the few that knew it were in league with it. However, to prevent detection, they hadn't been marked yet, and were primarily acting as spies in the school. Their contact to the outside world was Jugson, one of the last few Death Eaters still in direct contact with Voldemort.

Another interesting fact was Ron's state of mind. Almost everybody had learnt about Luna "Loony" Lovegood at some point the previous year, but, as Ron had been one of the most hot-tempered students before the summer, his change had been spectacular for some. Reactions were varied. His Gryffindor year mates and his siblings, as well as Gryffindor Quidditch teams, were passively supportive. The other Gryffindors, including Hermione, generally ignored him. The other houses showed a mix of surprise at the dreamy tirades, and humour at the sometimes funny situations he went into. Some people were outright mocking him, although never in view or earshot of another Weasley, as consequences could be most unpleasant, in different ways depending on the overhearing Weasley. Percy would report them immediately, the twins would make the offender fall in the stairs quite often, and Ginny would yell on them to no end.

In the first days of October, though, the Gryffindor students found themselves irate at Ron's new weird action: he had drawn four parallel marks on every Gryffindor crest visible in the common room, hiding its eye, thus making the regal lion look like it was blind. Not the most inspiring act for the House. He also changed the colour of its paws and mane, to a fiery red. His only comment, before Percy and another seventh year brought him to McGonagall, was that "He is

finding the path back, and she'll help him." He got some punishment for this, and life went back to normal, and even Ginny forgot about the incident.

Speaking of Ginny, there was something interesting that could be noted, although almost nobody knew about that. One morning, she woke suddenly, after a particularly nasty nightmare, which ended in her running in a sun-moulded desert of dunes, followed by a pack of hyenas. During the dream, she had felt she could escape, or even fight back, and that something that was buried deep in her was tugging at her. Upon waking, though, at the wee hour of three in the morning, she barely contained a scream of fright, as her hands were covered with hair. Or rather, fiery fur the same colour than her hair. She was so frightened that she couldn't think clearly, apart from going straight to the Transfiguration teacher. Hidden in the invisibility cloak, she went to Albus Dumbledore's office, and knocked at the door. When a sleepy old wizard opened, she realized that she was still under her invisibility cloak, and shrugged it aside. Startled at her appearance, the previous Headmaster stepped back, before smiling at her benignly.

"What can I do for you, Miss Weasley? I recall that it's a little late... or early, if you wish."

Instead of answering, she showed him her hands, still covered in fur. Even their shape wasn't exactly human anymore, and her trek to his office had been difficult at some points.

"Hmmm... interesting. Now, can you explain? I hope it's not a prank someone played on you, though."

She recounted her nightmare, her deep feeling of being able to defend herself against that particular danger, and her waking with this. She knew it couldn't be a prank, as she had protected her bed since the start of term. Having lived in the same house as her twins, she had been forced to learn to protect herself instinctively. While she was telling him the event, he conjured a set of tea and served her a glass. Seeing her agitated and deformed hands, he also charmed her cup to attach itself to her hand.

Her story got the old man thinking for a while, still looking at her through his half-moon spectacles, which he had recovered from a table top just as she entered. Seeming to have taken a decision, he stood and went in the following room, where she could hear him moving glass around. When he went back, he had a potion in his hand. He sat before speaking.

“Don’t be afraid. What you are experiencing isn’t generally observed until later in life, and only for certain... ‘gifted’ persons.”

“What kind of gift, Professor?”

“Before I answer, I want you to think about your nightmare again, and ask yourself a question. How could you have escaped or defended against the hyenas? Without a wand; be creative.” He added the last part with a smile, having seen her opening her mouth too quickly.

She became thoughtful, and, at first, didn’t see how. She had had no weapon, and the terrain was barren, so she only had to count on herself. She couldn’t have fought in the muggle way, and even if she could have, they were too numerous for her small frame to fight them. Small frame? That elicited a stir in her, but she didn’t have another insight right then. She explored another track of thoughts, and reflected about whom, in her place, could have either escaped or fought against the desert crawlers.

The answer was immediate. Another, bigger, creature. The hyenas were easily scared of something bigger than them, especially if the creature could fight back. What creature could be, at the same time, bigger than them, able to fight them, and able to run faster than them?

A bear – too slow to escape.

A badger – too small.

A lion – too... perfect?

Her head shot up, looking at her Professor in confusion. Before she could say anything, he spoke.

“What animal was it, miss Weasley?”

Stunned, she asked “You... you knew!”

“I merely sent your thoughts in the proper directions. You did the work. So, what animal will soon pound our grassy grounds?”

“You don’t mean... I will... an animagus?”

“I mean it, Ginevra. I may even help you with the process. You see, twenty years ago, four young boys came in this very school, and one of them was a werewolf. The others decided to help him during his crisis and became animagus. They did that by themselves, and never registered, and it took them a little time, less that most, but if they had only asked, I could have given them a bit of this.” He held her the opened flask.

She sniffed it suspiciously, and he chuckled. “You’re quite safe with me, Ginevra. But I admire your sense of survival, obviously gotten from your infamous twin brothers.”

She blushed, before smiled slightly and answered, tentatively “I think it was... a lion?”

He frowned, looking at her red-furred hands inquiringly. “A lion?”

She looked at her hands too, before shrugging. “It was only a logical deduction based on incomplete information. I don’t know that many animal species, and perhaps there are some that would be more appropriate.”

“Well...” he nodded towards the vial she was still holding, “there is a quicker and surer way to know.”

She looked at the potion, understanding in her eyes. Just before downing the potion, though, he interrupted her. "Make yourself comfortable first. You are going to sleep again, only to find your subconscious animal part."

She did, before drinking the liquid. The effect was instantaneous, and she collapsed on the armchair. Dumbledore took the empty vial from her hand. If what he thought was true, there would be a new mountain lioness gracing his school very soon. He just had to teach her to turn back into herself when she would wake up. At the same time, in a dark mansion...

"Master?"

The young man, even with his black robe, didn't seem imposing as he was trembling with fear. This was a common occurrence of Voldemort followers nowadays, as they were very few, and he was very upset, thus always venting his anger on the same people. Of the remaining twenty Death Eaters, who had had the chance of not being known by the treacherous Malfoy, one had already been killed by Voldemort, in a fit of rage against his powerlessness. Still, Alfred Jugson had been summoned, and couldn't very well refuse, or his life really would have been forfeit.

"How is the search going, Jugson?"

He sighed imperceptibly. Voldemort seemed better today. And the news he was bringing him would appease him even more. "Very good, my Lord. We found the description of the spell in the archives of the wizarding museums we broke into last night. The creatures were evil spirits, and the spell allowed them to take possession of a dead wizard. This didn't prevent the decaying from their corpses, though."

"And their communication?"

"We are still searching the archives, Master. It's only a matter of time."

“Time is the essence, Jugson. Time is the essence.” Voldemort appeared thoughtful for a few seconds, before continuing “And how are our new charges?”

“They are fine, Master. They are willing to meet you...”

“They won’t. Not yet. I don’t want the old fool to uncover them by reading my face from their mind. Keep them in check, and report to me.” The Dark Lord, formerly known as Tom Marvolo Riddle, turned around in his chair, and fixed the flames intensely. After a time, sensing that his follower hadn’t left, he said “Come back tomorrow, and have more to say.”

Jugson, now being effectively dismissed, bowed deeply to his master, and walked backwards until out of the room. These times, the level of deference they showed towards their master was directly related to their life expectancy.

Later, in Hogwarts...

Hermione Granger was angry. Angry, and upset. Her logical mind had been working around the problem for days, but, surprisingly, she couldn’t find an answer by herself. That alone was upsetting her.

How could she have been Sorted in Gryffindor?

During her first year, she had been brave as much as studious, all right. But there were more than four different types of minds, and she still didn’t see how the damn hat could have put her in a house of bigoted, prejudiced, and especially stupid persons. Gryffindor only won the House cup through Quidditch, and she didn’t even like being on a broom. All in all, she was feeling singled out, even if it was only a personal feeling. And she was fed up of it.

Now, a mere week into October, after having documented herself from some books, she could be seen going to her previous Head of House, now Headmistress, for a chat.

“I’m Hermione Granger. I have a question about the Sorting Hat.” Any passing student would have thought her crazy, because she was

actually speaking to the gargoyle guarding the Headmistress' office, but she had her reason. Earlier in the year, not knowing the password, she had inadvertently addressed the gargoyle directly, acting as if the stone statue had been a muggle assistant, like the one working in her parents' dentist office. And it had worked. She just had to state her name and reason for entering, and, if the Headmistress was there, the gargoyle would let her pass. Few knew that anyway, as the numerous Headmasters that had worked in that office seemed to have preferred giving everybody the password to their office. This mean of entering wasn't even written in *Hogwarts: a History*!

When in the office proper, her favourite teacher looked up the desk, which was still full of mounds of paper. Although curious as to who gave the fuming teenager her office's password, Minerva McGonagall preferred to ask what was wrong first. "What can I do for you, Miss Granger?"

"Well, madam, I was asking myself..." she took a deep breath, before rushing "I want to change houses. I want to be re-Sorted."

The Headmistress looked at her intently for a moment, before standing up. "To any other student, Miss Granger, I'd have said that this can't be done..."

"But in *Hogwarts, a History*, it is said that it has been done four times since the founding of the school..."

McGonagall raised her hand, trying to interrupt the girl's tirade. "As I said, to any other student, I'd have said that, but I know that you have explored every other issue before coming up here, including the infamous book you cited. Now, before any other action, would you care to enlighten me about your reasons for wanting this?"

Hermione had blushed during the woman's speech, but now quickly regained her natural complexion as she was preparing her answer. "I don't care about bravery, courage, and any other Gryffindor so-called 'virtues.' All I want to do is study more, to understand the world and the magic, in general and in every detail." A pause. "I think I'd do better in Ravenclaw." Another pause. "In fact, the Hat almost put me

in Ravenclaw. It certainly felt I had enough bravery in me to stay in Gryffindor for seven years. I feel that I depleted my bravery in the two years that went by already. Even Quidditch doesn't interest me anymore. Well... it never did, but now, I'm quite repulsed by it. And the few friends I had... well... let's say Ron isn't mentally there anymore; my dorm mates are beauty-obsessed witches; and the others have already cast me out because of my grades."

"Well... I can't say that I'm happy about your decision, as, when I was Head of Gryffindor, I was delighted to have at least one clever witch in my house." Hermione blushed at the praise, while the Headmistress continued. "But, as it is your decision, and you seem to have read everything about it, we will proceed. You know how to do it?"

"Yes. I read that I had to find a member for each house to vouch for my resorting. I have some insight about who to ask, but I wanted to make my intention clear with you from the beginning."

"Very well. As soon as you have your four witnesses, come back here and we'll arrange the resorting. However, make sure that they are not doing it as a service, because they are going to be tested by the Hat also on your decision. They have to agree wholeheartedly."

"Of course. Thank you, and good afternoon, Headmistress. I will come back soon."

Hermione then left the room, reflecting about herself. She was tired of being in Gryffindor, but would the Hat choose another house for her? What if she was to be sorted in Hufflepuff? Or even worse, Slytherin? They sure calmed themselves, but, still... even with the calmed environment, switching from Gryffindor to Slytherin would be considered a major treason by those uptight idiots. What was wrong in being in Slytherin anyway? This year, they proved that they weren't necessarily evil at heart, only ambitious and cunning. She was ambitious and cunning herself, so was it making her a Slytherin? When she had been sorted, a little more than two years before, she had politely asked the Hat to put her in the House where the great Albus Dumbledore had been, but she hadn't known the general

behaviour of the houses. Now that she knew for a fact that Ravenclaws were studious, she wanted to go there, but the mere act of asking for a resorting was so Slytherin, that she wasn't really sure anymore.

‘At least, in Slytherin, I'd have Professor Snape as Head of House...’ The thought came uninvited, making her pause. The Potion Master had proven interesting to discuss with. They had talked about his potion research, and her studies, and she felt that she could talk with him more freely now than with most of her own housemates. And, despite keeping his cold facade for everyone, she was rewarded by smiles sometimes, and felt incredibly proud of it. He wasn't as cold and spiteful than he was the year before, and generally taught well in practical Defence, but he was still wary of opening up, especially to those kids.

Pondering upon this, she remembered that, at one time the day before, she had been insulted by Pansy Parkinson, who had taken upon herself to follow Draco's steps. He had overheard it, and had arrived just as Crabbe and Goyle had pushed her on the floor. He immediately took points from them and assigned detention with the caretaker. The four students were surprised, because he had never taken points from his own house before. The rest of the day, the three Slytherins had avoided being near her at all times.

She shook her head, and went to the Library. She had a free period, and almost always passed them in the Library now, except when discussing with Snape in his office. Once there, she took some books from her magically enhanced schoolbag, and arranged them on the table in front of her. The schoolbag had been bought in Diagon Alley during one of her summer's book shopping sprees. It could contain a large number of books, always giving the one the user wanted. It was always lightweight, despite being sturdy enough to withhold rough handling. She opened the books, and continued her current research topic about being able to mentally discuss with creatures. She hoped that it would enable her, or anyone, to discuss as 'normally' as possible with a Dementor. So far, she hadn't had success, but she had several ideas. The first would be a modified Legilimency spell, but, to be able to research that, she needed a few courses in Mind Control, as well as Spell Design. Even if she had read a few

interesting books on the subjects, she wasn't advanced enough in them to do that. Besides, Spell Design was a NEWT course, reserved for 6th and 7th years, and the teachers couldn't help her there, she thought. Her second insight was to modify an existing potion, which allowed the imbiber to speak any language with sentient creatures of a given race. To work properly, though, the potion must contain the powdered tongue of a member of said race, and she wasn't sure that Dementors had a tongue anyways, even if they could Kiss someone to death. The thought made her smile, before she concentrated on her self-assigned work.

After an hour of re-designing the potion two or three times, she decided that the person most able to help her at that would be the Potion Master, and she collected her books before heading to his office.

That evening...

He found himself on a bed, panting. His heart beating fearfully, he rose and started to explore his surroundings. It was quick, because the place was small. Small, and without any door or window. He started to panic, and scanned the set of rooms rapidly.

He had arrived in a sort of bedroom. The bed was small, but very comfortable. There was a desk with two drawers, and a sturdy chair. The floor was wooden, and covered with small brown rugs. The stone walls were beige, almost bare, as there was a shield hanging on the wall opposite the bed, with two swords crossed behind it. There was also an empty bookcase, and an equally empty cupboard. Everything was neat, as if the place had just been dusted and cleaned the hour before. Looking around at the bed, he saw that even the crumpled linens of where he had sat were now smoothed. This little fact, added to everything that had happened to him the day before, made him think for a while, before shrugging and returning to the room's exploration.

There were two archways leading to adjoining rooms. The first, initially closed with a brown curtain, led to a bathroom, if the toilet seat, the porcelain sink, and the shower stall were of any indication. Aside the sink, on a low cupboard, was an intricately decorated plate

and a glass, with some silverware on the side. The cupboard also hosted some towels and soap. The whole room was covered in white ceramic tiles.

He returned to the previous room, before suddenly noticing something. He returned in the bathroom and remarked that even the smell was fresh. The bathroom smelled of woodland and mint! Looking at the plate, and feeling a little hungry, he uttered aloud “If there were some bread and cheese, that would be a self-sufficient place.”

He had just finished his sentence when he jumped a foot in the air in fright at the unexpected popping sound. There, on the plate, two slices of food had appeared. Bread and cheese! Trying to calm his beating heart, he approached slowly, and mouthed “I’d like some cake.”

A cake appeared.

And when he asked for some water, the glass nearby filled itself with water.

He looked around him frantically, trying to notice if there was any indication of him being watched. Nothing. There was only one mirror in the whole setting, and it was a mobile and light full-length mirror. All the reality shows that he had seen on his friends’ television were in places where mirrors were everywhere on the walls, camcorders behind them. He thought of the other explanation, and his jaw fell on the floor. He was aghast at the implication of all this. In all effect, though, he was prisoner, in a cell where he could live, and eat. He didn’t want to be retained, though. He had a life to live!

He returned to the first room, and explored the second archway. It led to an almost-empty room. There only was a wooden bench there, covered in cushions, and a metal staff. Taking the staff to inspect it, he immediately noticed that it was quite heavy, and that there were a few words written on its end.

“To my son Jamie – Say weight”

He didn't know that Jamie, but was more interested by the second part. Say weight, say weight... he didn't understand the weight of what he had to say, or even if he had to say the word 'weight'. The thought made him smile, as he remembered a passage from a famous muggle book, where a wizard had to utter the word 'friend' in an old language. Shaking his head, and thinking it was his own weight, he told it aloud, before dropping the suddenly heavy staff. Understanding dawned on his face, and he grasped the staff again, uttered "one pound", and raised it easily. In the rooms, he wasn't disturbed about the strangeness of items anymore, and he understood that the staff could be used to press weights. That would improve his muscles, he thought, and, curious about his actual strength, he increased the weight until he couldn't lift it. He then noticed that, despite his small frame, he was able to lift the metal bar with as much as a hundred pounds on it. He shrugged the feeling of strangeness aside, and, not having noticed anything else, he put the staff on the bench again, and left the room.

He returned to the bedroom again, and, due to the change of perspective, he remarked that the bookshelf wasn't exactly empty, as a wooden box resided on top of it. Grasping the chair from the desk and climbing on it, he took the box and deposited it on the desk. Before opening it, he noticed that the box was decorated with two letters: G. S. His initials. Idly asking himself if that was his own Pandora box, from which hideous memories would emerge, he put a tentative hand on the lid lock.

Only to jerk it away with a yelp, as a spark could be seen. He had been electrocuted! Oddly, it hadn't been harmful at all, but still, it had surprised him. Not understanding the whole thing at all, he took the box again, and put it where it was before, on top of the bookcase. Turning around to grasp the bedroom-and-study once more, he noticed two things. Firstly, there were drawers on the desk, and he hadn't tried to open them yet. And secondly, there was a book near the bed. He knew the book, as he was holding it when he had arrived, so he went straight to the drawers, with the intent of opening them. He stopped in midcourse, afraid of getting the same treatment than the box delivered to him. He removed his pyjama vest, and gathered it around his hand. Nothing happened when he touched the drawers' handles, and he opened them.

The first was empty. He sighed, thinking that the second would be as empty as the first, and as empty as the whole setting appeared to be. He was surprised, then, to find a book in it. Grasping it, he noticed that it was a purple-covered diary, and that its author seemed to be a person named Ginevra Shaun.

His head swam. He had to sit down.

Ginevra Shaun.

G. Shaun. – the author of the book.

G. S. – the initials on his ring.

How sure was he that the ring was his, anyway? He wasn't even sure that his real name was Gabriel... Well, it wouldn't be Ginevra, because it was a girl's name, but still, the name called to him, to the hidden part of his mind. Despite his exhausted state, he thought some more, and also remarked that the diary's owner had also written the book that led him here. He felt too tired to read the booklet, though, and decided to sleep until the morning, and then he would try to escape.

The following day, he began with a quick shower and a wondering breakfast. The shower's water temperature was perfect, and the magicked plate gave him everything he asked for. When stowing the plate in the sink, he also noticed that his damp towel had disappeared, only to reappear, clean, in the cupboard. The shower also was as neat as it was before he has taken it. The place seemed to clean automatically, he reflected.

He began to read the diary, but interrupted himself quickly. Now that he was used to the rooms, he remarked that there was a very soft vibration coming from the floor and walls. The second reason for his interruption was that the diary itself was coded, and there was no indication of a key anywhere. Unless...

Unless it was the same as the book. He wished he had some paper to draw the necessary grids, and, reflecting about the plate, decided to ask it aloud.

“I’d like some paper and a pen, please.” No need to be impolite if somebody was watching him somehow. Hearing a sound in the first drawer, he opened it to see that it now contained some paper and pen, as requested. However, the paper and pen weren’t exactly what he was used to. The sheets of paper were rolled in scrolls, and the paper texture was much heavier than his usual school material. The pen... wasn’t a pen, as it was a quill, next to an inkwell. Not understanding the meaning of all this, or why the room gave him a quill when he asked for a pen, he started to decode the diary anyway. He figured that if there was a way out of here, it was perhaps written in it. He started working on it, and quickly found that he was quite proficient in writing with a quill. ‘Where did I learn that?’ he reflected absentmindedly, while drawing his grids.

He didn’t stop working for the whole day and into the night, except for the customary stops at the loo or for eating something from the plate when his watch indicated lunch and dinner time. The plate cleaned itself also, he found out. During the course of the ‘day’, he absently noticed that, despite not having doors or windows, or even light appliances, the room was lighted as if it had windows. Even when his watch indicated that it was night time, the room had some light, but it was then more like an artificial one.

However, he was so tired from his constant work that he fell asleep on it, and napped for a few hours. When he woke, the light, that had lowered while he slept, came back. Glancing at his watch, he remarked that it was six in the morning, and he panicked, before remembering his work.

When he had stopped working because of falling asleep on the book and papers, he had translated only a small part of the diary, and didn’t understand the meaning of it.

Granted, the language was proper English, except for old turns of phrase. But there were many words he didn’t recognise. Obviously, the diary had been written with its owner as sole intended reader, and

it didn't explain everything. Still, Gabriel could make out some explanations about 'his' ring. It appeared that this madam Shaun had lived some years ago, and she had constructed this isolated, self-cleaning, and self-refilling place to seek refuge from either danger or overbearing people. The place had other properties, but he didn't understand them at all. She described herself as a teacher, at a local boarding school, and a Technomancy researcher, but the word was one of the many Gabriel didn't understand, and he naïvely resolved to take a look at a dictionary when he would be back. The ring was to transport its wearer when he spoke the activation word, but there were more than one destination. He had fallen asleep just after translating that part, and had written down the words and their supposed significance. When he read them again, he was overjoyed, because he thought that he could finally escape the place. He liked the rooms, and would use it gladly in the future, but for now, he needed to go back. He had already missed a whole day of school!

He took the list of activation words in his hand, and, before using it, remembered that, should the ring bring him to a dangerous place, he could always use the 'safehaven' word to come back. He fidgeted with his ring to make sure that it was properly attached, and spoke the first activation sequence from the list.

"Hogliewarts"

Meanwhile...

Ginny had been sleeping soundly, dreaming of her as a mountain lioness, hunting preys and fooling around, when a hand shaking her shoulder woke her. Opening her eyes slowly, she saw Ron's face lit by the moon from the window. She also noticed the fur on her hands, again. Ron saw it, too, but said nothing. She closed her eyes again and meditated, as her Transfiguration Professor had taught her, to change back to her natural skin. When she opened her eyes again, Ron tugged urgently at her sleeve.

"Come down, Ginny, and take your cloak, he'll be there soon."

"Who?"

But Ron had left the dorm already. Sighing, she took the invisibility cloak and followed him. She absentmindedly asked herself how he had been able to get up the stairs, as they were charmed to prevent the boys from accessing the girls' dorms.

He was already at the portrait hole, waiting for her. They put the cloak around themselves, and went out. Ron seemed to know exactly where he was going, even if that part of the castle was seldom used, and Ginny could only follow, as the lean redhead pressed on. He stopped at a door, where the form of Luna Lovegood was waiting, airily looking straight towards them. They removed the cloak, but Luna didn't seem to be surprised. 'For her to be surprised, the circumstances would have to be exceptional,' Ginny thought.

"Hi Ron, Ginny."

"Hello, Luna."

"You felt it too?" Luna asked to Ron. Ginny didn't say anything, though, wondering why those two needed her.

"Yes."

"The door is closed, though. Even to Alohomora."

"Hmm... let's do something else. After all, we are here only to watch. Transglassius!"

He had moved his wand in a complicated motion ending in a square, and the door appeared to shimmer for a while, as if deciding to allow the spell or not. Ginny was dumbfounded that her brother knew such a spell, but quieted when they saw what was behind the now transparent door. The spell had made the transparency only one-way, though, but she didn't know that, otherwise she would have asked herself what other uses her brother, or his mischievous siblings, could make of this spell.

It was an office, visibly a teacher's. But there was so much dust around that it seemed it had been abandoned decades ago. There

were still books around, an open trunk and some robes, and papers were littering the desk and the floor.

“What are we do...” she started, before the others quieted her suddenly. Looking at her pointedly, Ron aimed his wand at the door, and spoke again.

“Silencio.”

“Okay. Thanks, Ron. Now I can talk, can’t I? What are we doing here and...”

“Shhh... He’s coming.”

“But... who?”

They didn’t answer and looked at the door expectantly. Knowing them, she had no other choice than to follow suit. She looked also. For five minutes. And then, in front of her eyes, someone appeared. Someone that she had problems to identify, but who tugged at her memory, even in his pyjama. And when that someone turned around in the room, she noticed the spiked black hair and the scar through the face, and that brought back some of the memories that had been unconsciously locked away. Memories of the funfair. Memories of Harry. She collapsed in the arms of Luna, who seemed to have positioned herself exactly to do that.

“Good job, Lun. Perhaps she’ll remember, now.”

“Thanks, Ron. Mobilicorpus!” at that, the prone body of Ginny rose in the air.

“Good. Let’s take her to the healer; she’ll need her strength for today’s match.”

They went back through the school, eerily avoiding the patrolling caretaker and his cat, and dropped Ginny at the Hospital wing. Then they kissed lightly, and, still without a sound, went back to their dorms. In the Headmistress office...

The little device could emit a loud signal, as the Headmistress discovered while waking up suddenly. Warily stepping towards the rapidly rotating silver device on a nearby shelf, she recognized it, and was suddenly more awake than before.

Someone, who wasn't recognized as a staff member, or a house-elf, had just portkeyed inside Hogwarts!

As the procedure of managing with an intruder wasn't clear in her mind, and the shrilling item behind her was still mewling, she preferred to double check with the old man who had given her her current position. She took a pinch of Floo powder and called for Albus Dumbledore. Had she known immediately what was to do, the rest of the story could have been different.  
In the old and dusty office again...

Gabriel couldn't refrain from coughing at first. Comparing to the place he left, the office was indeed full of dust, and smelled... like an enclosed place. He turned around, taking in the office. He felt he was being watched for a moment, before the feeling went away. Thanks to the moonlight, he read some of the papers on the desk, and guessed that they could be students' assignments, even if the subject was totally unknown to him. He also remarked that the open trunk near the wall had the G.S. initials on it, again.

After dusting the chair a little, eliciting more coughs, he sat on it and thought about the place for a while. If this was the office of Madam Shaun, and if she appeared to be dead, how comes nobody ever came to reclaim it, or even to clean it? Looking at the books on the shelves, and thinking of the empty bookcase in the isolated rooms, he made the decision of storing the books there. By reading them, he thought that he would be able to better understand his ring and the rooms themselves, as well as his own situation. Besides, if somebody had needed them at one point, they wouldn't have been there anymore.

He then proceeded to store the books in the trunk, gathered the papers in a neat pile on the desk, and, held the trunk handles. He wasn't as nervous as the previous time when he spoke again.

“Safehaven.”

Once in the room, he dropped the trunk, and glanced at his list of activation words again. The second one on the list was “Preceding strut”, but a note seemed to have been attached to it. Reading it, Gabriel's heart suddenly beat with joy. Apparently, the ring kept a memory of the places he went, like a stack of cards, and these particular activation words took the ring bearer to the place he was before. He guessed his destination correctly, and when he uttered the words, found himself in the dusty office again. There, he tried to open the door, but failed. Speaking the words again, he found himself back in the hideaway. There, he took his book, and, another wording later, he found himself in his bed, in Grace's guest bedroom.

All this coming and going had taken some time, and it was now time to prepare for breakfast, and Grace's unavoidable questions about where he went. He removed and dusted his pyjama, took a shower, and dressed before going in the kitchen.

Strangely, Grace didn't seem fazed that he had been away for a whole day, and kept asking him questions about the previous week-end. He answered most of them truthfully, but was dumbfounded about her lack of attention about his leave. The breakfast finished, and the plates stored away, he removed the Monday page from the tear-out calendar on the wall, and then went upstairs to prepare for school. When he went down, shouting a quick good-bye to Grace, he suddenly stood in front of the calendar, shocked. Grace had put the crumpled Monday page back. He hadn't time to reflect on that, though, as Joan was calling for him from outside.

To be continued in next chapter: The Pitch...

If you knew it, raise one hand,  
Review with your other hand.  
If you didn't, I beg you,  
Drop me a nice review too.

## Chapter 16 – The Pitch

Ron was sorry. He was sorry at himself, for his lack of understanding, and sorry for his little sister, because, contrarily to what he and Luna had imagined, she still didn't remember the funfair escapade. However, whatever the deepness of Ron's sorrow, it never showed on his face anymore, and nobody got a clue. For her part, Ginny had only napped a few minutes in the Hospital wing, and she had woken up quickly. Feeling quite well despite not knowing how she arrived there, she had escaped the matron and had gone straight to her dorm to change, before leaving for the breakfast of the most important day since the beginning of term.

Today, at 2pm, was the first Quidditch match of the season, and Gryffindor was playing against Slytherin!

Apart from Draco Malfoy, the other Slytherin players were still there, even the brutes Crabbe and Goyle were still at the beater positions. And, judging by their looks, they were ready to trounce their opponents that afternoon. The Hufflepuff seemed loyal to the previous year's scores and thought that Gryffindor would win, whereas the few Ravenclaw that weren't against Quidditch realistically remarked that, while both teams lost their favourite seeker, Harry had always been the one winning, and that did put both teams on the same winning chance.

All these comments had their effect on the players, and, when lunch arrived, Ginny was nervous. She now understood why Harry had never eaten much before matches, as she couldn't eat anything either. Unconsciously, she repeated Harry's preparations, even letting her hair loose from her usual ponytail and messing them up. In the Quidditch changing rooms, while the crowd took place, she dressed slowly, brooding about Harry's absence, and wishing that he'd be there. Only Oliver Wood's solid prep talk brought her to her senses again, enough to tie her hair again, before they all went to the field, to the applause of their house, and the boos of Slytherin. As usual, Lee Jordan was commenting the encounter, next to the dismayed Headmistress.

The match started pretty well for the Gryffindors, as their chasers put the quaffle three successive times through Slytherin's loops. But Slytherin's strategy finally showed itself, and it hadn't changed from the preceding years. They were still committing fouls to disable players, only this time, they were doing it in a deliberate and concerted manner. Madam Hooch couldn't keep track of all players, and no less that four fouls were done at the same time, multiple times. This was wearing the Gryffindors down, and Oliver Wood had most difficulties keeping the hoops with his bruised sides, letting three attempts pass through his goals. He glanced up at Ginny, in hope that she would find the snitch before they would be crushed, but she was inspecting the field tirelessly, and the golden ball hadn't been spotted yet. Strangely, the Slytherin seeker didn't seem to be searching for it, as he was only flying leisurely in front of her, obviously trying to block her view. Some time later, Gryffindor scored one goal, but Slytherin quickly retaliated. The Gryffindors were getting desperate, and Oliver understood that, either they were going to find the snitch quickly, or Slytherin would gain so many points that beating them out of the Cup would be impossible. Even the teachers looked stunned at the level of unfairness they played.

Suddenly, Oliver saw a golden tint near the floor, and, neglecting the incoming Slytherin chasers, frantically gestured and called to Ginny. She noticed him, turned her head, saw the Snitch, and...

...blacked out.

In a public high school, hundreds of miles away...

The day had been weird. It was as if the whole world had waited for him to get out before turning again. It was Monday everywhere. Monday-closed shops were closed, the class schedule was a Monday's, and everyone looked at him strangely, as he was visibly stunned at this. The only rational explanation would be that all his outing had been a dream, he thought. But what about the diary he remembered storing in his nightstand at Grace's house?

The morning had passed quietly, his friends thinking that he was brooding over the week-end revelations, and they had eaten silently as well. They were now in Phys. Ed., and their teacher had decided

to let them play some volley-ball. Some students knew the sport already and some didn't know anything. The ones that knew mostly included the jocks that had made fun of Gabriel and his friends earlier in the term, and they grouped together as a team, ready to crush any opposition. Unfortunately, only Tamara knew a little bit of the sport, and the first match that ensued, between the two groups, saw the domination of the jocks, with no point marked by Gabriel's team whatsoever. Besides, despite the injunctions of the teacher, the jocks played it rough and, more than once, Gabriel or one of his friends got a bruise from that. The last point of the game, though, was valiantly fought, but finished by a smash from the jocks, directed straight into Gabriel's face. Seeing the ball arriving with high velocity, he just had time to wonder about its golden tinge, before being knocked out. Back on Hogwarts' Quidditch pitch...

Ginny had seemed to collapse on her broom, but, to everyone's eyes, the movement smoothly turned into a crouching position on the broom, before launching herself in the air, the Slytherin seeker hot on her tail, as, if she caught the Snitch right now, they would lose. Her dive, despite having started slowly, began to gather speed as she descended, wide-eyed, towards the ground.

Ron was in the stands, right next to Hermione, who had taken a break in her studies to show a bit of last-minute solidarity towards her House. They hadn't sat there on purpose, but, when Ginny started her dive, Ron nudged Hermione in the ribs.

"What?" She clearly wasn't happy to find her ex-friend and now lunatic housemate sitting next to her.

His eyes were fixed on Ginny, though, and he muttered "Look at his eye!"

For a second, she couldn't understand whose eye he was speaking of, and looked at the Slytherin Seeker's face through Ron's proffered omnioculars. Looking at her, Ron muttered "the other seeker!" and she changed to look at the plunging face of Ginny Weasley. He had left the zoom to its maximum setting, and she clearly saw her closed left eye, and her wide-open right one, as if she was winking. Normally,

she thought, you needed both your eyes to evaluate distances. Even stranger was the tint in her eye, as if her eyes were clearer from their usual chocolate colour. Hermione quickly looked around, but everyone was cheering at the diving Seekers, and nobody seemed to have paid attention at her face. Even Ron seemed to be oblivious now, looking as ecstatic as the others.

The seekers were diving fast. Very fast. So fast that the Slytherin had trouble following the Gryffindor, even with a superior broom. So fast even that their brooms began to vibrate. Even Ginny newly-acquired broom shouldn't go that fast, normally. But the fact was ignored by the shouting crowd. Then, just as they were closing on it, the snitch shot up, and got inside the rough game play. Ginny manoeuvred her broom accordingly, but the other seeker, unable to see what was in front of her, continued straight into the ground, his broom hitting the soil hard. Due to its inertia, his body continued on its way, gliding three feet on the ground before stopping, unconscious. The Slytherins didn't have time to call for a timeout, though, because Ginny got hold of the Snitch while it was trying to escape through the melee of chasers.

The stunned pitch held its breath for a second, not believing their eyes, before erupting into shouts of victory from Gryffindor, and of dismay from Slytherin. Lee Jordan could only barely be heard above the ruckus, to comment on the 'heroic display by the valiant seeker who tore the victory out of the evil clutches of the flying slime-balls,' just before being silenced by the Headmistress. During that time, Ginny performed a short victory dance with her broom, turning around the handle, fifteen feet above the ground.

Now, that sort of 'dance' wasn't uncommon for practised players, even if a little difficult. However, Ginny wasn't seasoned. At all. True, she had played at home, with her brothers, and some times, Hermione had been there too, watching and reading. Ginny was good enough to have been chosen as Gryffindor Seeker, but that move reminded Hermione more of someone like... Harry. The wondering teen didn't have time to extrapolate this, as the victorious Seeker fell limp on her broom, before dropping from it.

The shouts of the crowd transformed into a yell of surprise and despair. Ginny was falling, falling, and falling towards the ground. The other Gryffindor players were turning around the pitch to celebrate, and the Slytherins had left for the changing rooms. Only Albus Dumbledore had the presence of mind to whip his wand and cast a cushioning charm on the ground. Even with that, she hit it badly, and the crunching sound of bones breaking could be heard in the now-silent pitch.

Somewhere full of clouds...

He was flying. The feeling was exhilarating, but strange at the same time. How could one fly without assistance? Reflecting upon this, he suddenly acknowledged the broom under him. And he was chasing an elusive golden tint. He knew that he had to catch it, and concentrated on grasping it. Once his hand closed around it, he was happy for a second, but everything fell back into blackness for a short time, before he felt someone shaking his shoulder.

“Wake up, young man. You should be fine, now.”

Gabriel blinked a few times, groggily adjusting to his environment. He had been dreaming, but was now sitting in a bed, in the school infirmary, and the old nurse had just woken him. He felt as if his head had tripled its size, and he patted it to check if he was whole. Finding a swelling on his forehead, he remembered. They had been playing volley-ball, and he had been hit with the ball, rather forcefully. That explained his presence here, as well as the swelling on his head, he thought.

He quickly went to his feet, verifying that his equilibrium hadn't been damaged. All seemed fine, so he thanked the old lady, and left the premises. He just didn't like staying in there. As if he had been there before, he thought. But still no memory emerged to confirm, and he went to the next period to meet his friends. Chemistry! He was anxious about his essay, and the dream was swiftly forgotten.

Some time later, he found himself doing an experiment with Kevin, something they both generally enjoyed. This time, it involved some ingredients that reacted by changing colours only when a precise

dose of each were mixed. During the experiment, Kevin told him something that caught his interest.

“Wow! See that colour? I wonder if the group Deep Purple chose its name based on it!”

Gabriel merely shrugged. He didn't know anything about popular music anyways.

“Perhaps they use this stuff in the tattoo parlour...”

“What?” his tone was still nasal, because of the volley-ball accident earlier.

“Yes, the tattoo parlour. You didn't think I made these myself?” Kevin nodded towards his shoulders, where the eagle and badger couldn't be seen because of the protecting garb, but Gabriel understood.

“Still, what is the link with this?”

“Even if I don't like coloured ones, I saw people getting tattoos with this kind of purple on it. That reminds me...” he looked at Gabriel with a calculating glint in his eyes.

“What?” Gabriel didn't like that look, it generally implied some mischief.

“I don't know... perhaps you aren't man enough to do it...” Kevin was openly smiling now, while sinking his hook.

“Well, you got me curious, now. What is it?”

“See, while we were away this week-end, I received a coupon at home. From the tattoo parlour. They want to promote their activities, and, if two persons go there to get a tattoo, and if one of them doesn't have one already, both get a hefty discount. More if both are newly tattooed.”

The bell rang before they could say more, and the usual confusion that ensued prevented normal talk, so they cleaned their workplace, collected their stuff, and went outside with the other members of the group. As it was the last class of the day, they left the school, and, once on the walkway, Gabriel asked his question. In the few minutes that elapsed since the end of the chemistry period, he had taken a decision.

“How much?”

Kevin smiled, sensing that his fish was caught.

“How much what?” Joan asked, curious.

Kevin decided to nag him a little, and answered to Joan. “I don’t know, Joan, but it seems that our friend Gabriel here wants to get himself marked.”

Seeing Gabriel’s look, horrified at Kevin’s betrayal, everyone laughed for a moment. Mortified at first, Gabriel soon joined everyone’s mirth.

Kevin then answered his first question. “If the price didn’t change, a tattoo like my eagle costs 20 pounds. The reductions we talked about are 15 percent in the first case, and 30 percent in the second. You can also...”

“Which cases?” Tamara seemed interested.

Gabriel answered. “Kevin told me about a coupon giving reductions for tattoo... well... ‘virgins’, if they are accompanied. The second rate is when both persons are... like that.”

“ Hmmm...” Tamara seemed thoughtful, looking alternatively between Gabriel and Kevin, before fixing Kevin, asking in a small voice. “Do you think it would look good? I mean... on me?”

Kevin understood her meaning, and clarified easily. "It sure wouldn't be as obvious, but you can also ask for a coloured tattoo, with light colours like white."

She winced. "I don't like white. I rather want something... I don't know... red, yellow, orange... something more..."

Gabriel was looking at her intently, and he interrupted "...fiery?"

She looked at him in dismay, but the others didn't catch the underlying sense, and she nodded. "Yes, fiery."

Thinking about something, Gabriel turned towards Kevin. "Is it possible to personalize a tattoo? I mean, can I bring one of my drawings?"

Kevin reflected a little, before answering. "I think it's possible, and I even saw a client once, asking for a tattoo with parts from other tattoos from the catalogue. That particular guy wanted a horse with wings, or something like that."

Gabriel nodded, muttering something. As nobody caught what he said, Kevin continued.

"It would be more expensive, though. Same goes for colours. The more colours there are, the higher the price. Why the question, Gabe?"

"I may have an idea for Tamara. I'll bring it tomorrow."

As they arrived to their separation point, they told each other their goodbyes and went home. As Joan and Gabriel were still together for a few hundreds of yards, she continued the conversation.

"So, you want to get marked?" she asked ironically.

He blushed, but nodded nonetheless. He didn't know why, but the idea of getting some personal mark on his skin appealed to him.

“What kind?”

The seemingly simple question started a long string of thoughts, because he wasn't sure of wanting the mythical bird anymore. Especially if he wanted to give its drawing to Tamara. He still wanted some flying animal, but also wanted a more regal one. Perhaps he would have to get two tattoos to satisfy his needs. After all, Kevin had two already. After a while walking like that, they arrived to the point where their path diverged, and, after hugging each other gently, they left to get home. When he entered Grace's house, Gabriel didn't notice the man who had been following him in the distance since they had left the school.

Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Hospital Wing...

Snape sighed. It looked like the infamous trio had re-united. Except that it wasn't Harry Potter in the bed now, only Ginny Weasley. Hermione and Ron were at her side, though, like they had been for Harry before. The Potion Master also sensed that something was strange with Ron's attitude. Previously, he had never looked into his charges' attitude unless it was disturbing him or his class, but, with all the changes coming in his way, he had opened his eyes at some point, and had noticed numerous things. How the Gryffindors Patil and Longbottom seemed to be very friendly towards each other. How Hermione was proud of her advances in research. And now, he privately remarked how Ronald Weasley seemed more like Luna Lovegood by the day. Which normal brother could stay at his sister's sick bed holding her hand, and have a smug look at the same time? This question elicited a stirring in the heart of the severe Potion Master, which he quickly quieted. No need to think about family now.

Returning to the present, he deposited a large glass, full of a dark grey wobbly substance, on the nightstand. Then, after nodding to Hermione and receiving a nod in return, he signalled to Madam Pomfrey and left the wing. Said Madam Pomfrey went to the bed, and cast a few spells on Ginny's broken arm and leg. As a result, the targeted limbs went soft, not containing bones anymore. Then, the matron woke Ginny up with a spell, and gave her the Skele-Gro glass Severus Snape had brought. The bone regrowing potion was going to

be painful, so she also provided a Dreamless Sleep draught to her, ignoring the envious look of Hermione.

Just before she fell to sleep, though, she spoke a few words that instilled doubt inside the Gryffindor resident genius' mind. "I hope we won."

They had waited for her, not only because she was a member of the team, and not only because she had been injured in a match, but mainly because she had been their only reason to have won. The usual Gryffindor Party hadn't taken place on the evening of the match itself, but the following day. The Headmistress, still with her old reflexes of Head of Gryffindor, had been surprised when she showed up in the common room at midnight, thinking that she was going to interrupt a party, as she always did, and finding no one up.

The next day, though, Ginny had to stay in bed for most of the day, while her bones were strengthening. Even with the Dreamless Sleep draught, her sleep had been interrupted by pain and nightmares. The pain was always localized in her re-growing limbs, so it didn't faze her. The nightmares, on the other hand, were incomprehensible. She was passing by hideous and frightening creatures, but she wasn't afraid. And she was in a train at the same time. She didn't know if she really could call them 'nightmares.' Finally, she could be released by Madam Pomfrey just after dinnertime. Just before leaving, though, Hermione showed herself at the wing door, frowning at her.

"What?" Ginny asked quite rudely. After all, she wanted to get back to her own room, and didn't even suspect that the party had been delayed for her. Besides, Hermione hadn't been in the family's good graces since the beginning of the summer.

"We have to talk."

"I don't see what we could talk about. Now..."

"Yesterday's match."

"You were there? How surprising of you."

“Okay, I was there. And, if you really want to know, okay I was a bitch this summer. Now, can we talk?”

Ginny was aghast at her admittance, and could only nod.

Hermione continued. “What do you remember from the match?”

“We were pathetic, and they were unfair. I saw a golden glint, and that’s all.”

Seeing the frowning look of her Hermione, she extrapolated. “Perhaps I’ve been hit in the head by a bludger at that moment, and fell on the grounds. I don’t remember. Errm... by how much did we lose?”

Hermione looked at her, before sighing. “You won.”

Thinking that she was joking, Ginny looked at her doubtfully, before answering sarcastically. “Of course we won. We were crushed, I lost consciousness, and we won because all Slytherin forfeited the game at that very moment. How funny.” She then noticed that Hermione was shaking her head. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. You won. You caught the Snitch.”

Ginny’s jaw fell on the floor. Well, not exactly, but it seemed that she had problems closing it. After a long moment, she answered. “That’s not possible! That’s...”

“That’s why I wanted to have a chat with you, before you arrive to the party.”

“What do you mean, a party?”

“As you caught the Snitch when the team was effectively crushed, you saved the day. You didn’t think that they would have had a party without you then? They are waiting for you now.”

“But... but...”

“You don’t remember doing it, that’s it?”

“Errm... yes. I blacked out after Oliver gestured at me, when I saw it on the ground, and I woke on a bloody hospital bed.”

“We don’t have much more time now, or the others would skin me alive...” lowering her voice, she muttered “...as if they didn’t want to do it already.” Returning to a normal voice, she continued. “You are going to act as if you did it. We are going to continue this discussion tomorrow evening. That is... if you agree.” She added the last part almost reluctantly, as if asking for people’s approval was something difficult. But she couldn’t do it if Ginny wasn’t agreeing, and she wanted to know what happened. Besides, if she succeeded in sorting this with her, Ginny could be the one Gryffindor vouching for her re-Sorting.

Said Ginny seemed to think for a while, before they arrived in front of the Fat Lady. “I agree.” She said, before uttering the Tower’s password, and entering a cheering crowd, smiling and raising her fist in the air.

The Slytherins were angry. Some were angry at losing the game to the ever-annoying Gryffindor, but most of them were even angrier towards their own team. Since the beginning of the term, they had maintained the statu quo, not attacking anyone first – of course, they were generally able to defend themselves when provoked, especially if the provoker played fair.

The team’s strategy had destroyed the fragile peace, and they had suffered two days of constant humiliations from students in the corridors, and also in the classrooms, as their teachers were also dismayed of the game’s level of unfairness. All Gryffindor team had gone to the Hospital wing after the match, because of the roughness of the game. Thankfully, only Ginny stayed more than a few hours.

In this volatile atmosphere, someone was happy. Pansy Parkinson was strutting in the corridors, and, seconded by her gorillas, was freely annoying people, thus adding to the imbroglio. Voldemort

wanted the school to be in disarray to occupy the 'old fool' Dumbledore? No problem. However, in her attempts to get the most mess in the least time, she forgot one rule, that even first year Gryffindors knew by heart: never mess with a Weasley when another is nearby.

True, Ronald Weasley was an easy target. He didn't even defend himself when the brutes pushed him from wall to wall until he fell on the ground following a low hit. The person that arrived behind them, though, even little, was their nightmare in flesh. She had been their nightmare two days ago when she had caught the Snitch. And now, Ginny Weasley was seething.

"HOW DARE YOU!"

Before the others could react, she launched herself and threw a punch into Pansy's stomach. When the girl fell down, holding her stomach, Ginny took her wand, and aimed at the two approaching gorillas. They snickered at her, thinking that Gryffindor seldom attacked anyway, and, seeing in her an easy prey, they continued to advance.

Bad idea.

Years of enduring Fred and George's pranks had taught her some tricks, and she quickly cast a spell on the corridor walls. Dozens of small arms and hands grasped the boys' clothes, and they got drawn to the opposite walls of the corridor, unsuccessfully struggling against the stony hands. They had a little liberty of movement, though, and, if they had thought a little, and if they had them on their person, they could have drawn their wands to retaliate. But they didn't, and Ginny went to Pansy, and, grasping her hair, pulled her face upwards to address her.

"Never. I said, never do that again..."

The kneeling girl spat on her face, and she drew back a little, stunned, but still holding her long and slick hair. Throwing back her arm, she aimed, and a resounding slap was heard in the corridor.

Pansy was thrown on the floor, her lip split, and a hand-shaped mark on her cheek. The mark was going to stay a while, Ginny reflected with a smile. She quickly lost that smile when she heard an angry voice behind her.

“Miss Weasley!” Severus Snape had been alerted by the ruckus, and, seeing the setting – two Gryffindor were standing and three Slytherin were in difficulty – immediately assumed the logical conclusion. “You are not allowed to fight in corridors, nor use magic there. That will be fifty points from Gryffindor, and detention with me for a month!”

“But, Professor, they attacked Ron first! Three against one!”

“Mister Weasley doesn’t seem to have any problem standing, as I see. And don’t start to object, or I’d be forced to take more p...”

A deep voice resounded from behind him. “I don’t think so, Severus.”

The Potion Master frowned, sighed, and then turned around. Slightly panting, Albus Dumbledore, Head of Gryffindor House, was addressing him. “My legs aren’t as nimble as when I was 100. You can guess, as well as I do, what really took place there.”

“Albus! The girl...”

“... obviously used magic, and she’ll be punished for that...” Dumbledore intoned, but, seeing the malevolent glint in the Slytherin students’ eyes, he smugly added “...by me. Detention this evening in my office, Miss Weasley. And, Severus, I’d suggest you give those points back, or I’ll be forced to remove some from your house, for starting it all. Please take that poor girl to the hospital wing, where Madam Pomfrey can find something to do, will you?”

“Very well, Headm... I mean, Albus. Up, Miss Parkinson!” she obeyed, and they left.

After a while, seeing Crabbe and Goyle still held to the walls, Albus asked. “Now, Miss Weasley, what can we do with them?”

Ginny didn't miss the mischievous twinkle in the old man's eyes, and answered lightly. "I don't know sir. The spell is rumoured to be permanent. They even found corpses hanging in some pyramids in Egypt, my brother Bill said. He's a curse breaker there, you know? The poor people died of hunger." They took Ron, and left the place, continuing a light conversation, and leaving both boys to struggle more wildly than before, trying to escape the stony hands that held them by their clothes. Dying could be envisioned by those two, but certainly not from hunger. At dinner that evening, everyone recounted the story of two rather fat and very naked boys going back to Slytherin quarters. The event seemed to appease the school, and the Slytherin House also decided to change their whole Quidditch team, as most of them had been forbidden to play again by their Head of House anyway.

After dinner, Ginny spent her detention with her Transfiguration Professor, practising her animagus transformation, while he was commenting and drinking his tea. She was rather advanced, and managed to transform her clothing into fur on both her arms. The detention, however, how pleasant it was, made her forget about Hermione's appointment.

Even satisfied of Crabbe and Goyle's treatment, Ginny woke up thinking that Pansy only got a little part of what she deserved. After all, she had been the... brain, behind the brutes' behaviour. Entering the common room that morning, she saw her twin brothers moodily looking at the fire, and decided to do something with them that day, too.

They went to breakfast together, and started to plan the first official prank of the term. Dubbing a prank 'official' meant for them that it had to happen in plain view of everybody, preferably in the Great Hall. They reflected about Pansy Parkinson overrated beauty, and decided that their prank was to make her appear much older, with wrinkles. And, to make her realize it even more, every other Slytherin would have the same head. A whole table of shrivelled Pansies! The mere thought of that made the three of them laugh in the corridors, a sound that all students, except first years, had learned to fear.

The twins got their pranking material out, and, aided by Ginny, prepared the concoctions that would do the trick, when mixed with the usual pumpkin juice and activated by wand at some point. When they were doing that, the twins asked about some hair from the person which appearance would be given to everyone, and Ginny immobilized herself, her eyes wide. The twins reacted quickly.

“What, Gin?”

“Yes, Gin, what?”

Her face lit up with a timid smile, and answered nothing. She grasped in her pockets, and, by a sheer stroke of luck, found a couple of hairs in one. She had wiped her hands at some point after having yanked the girl’s head the previous day, and the greasy threads had stuck in her cloth. ‘What a pity,’ she thought, ‘I’ll be forced to wash my robes now.’

She held the hair strands, and talked towards them, her eyes looking somewhere else. “Do you think possible... I mean... would it be as fun as this prank to... No, it’s ridiculous.”

“Go ahead, Gin.”

“We can’t say it’s ridiculous before hearing it, you know?”

That seemed to placate her, and she looked at them again. “If, at the same time, all Gryffindors look like Harry?”

They looked at her inquiringly “Harry?”

“Harry Potter, you prats!”

“We know, Gin. It’s just... It would be fun, sure. But we’ll need a string of his hair, you know... and...”

She blushed. Of course they needed some of his hair. But that’s why she had asked herself the question first. Locked away in her trunk, she had what could be called ‘remains of her crush’, items from the

time when she had been a pre-teen and had collected all little objects Harry had touched. That way, she had got some of his hair in a little locket. She wasn't to admit all that to her brothers, though. But she got up and retrieved one strand, before locking everything and coming back to them.

The preparations went quickly, because the twins had all the base potions already prepared. As they couldn't play pranks, they had devoted their time in preparing them. The prank would happen at dinner that evening.

So, after a day where all her free time out of class was spent preparing the prank, it's a little nervous Ginny that sat on Gryffindor table. Her brothers, unable to do it due to their oath, had rapidly taught her the proper wand movement to activate the spells. They had also confirmed having seen Dobby, a new house-elf, and one of the most... versatile and exuberant they ever seen. They had seen him and given him their product, asking to spread it correctly on the proper tables. The prank duration had been calibrated so that the only area of effect was the Great Hall. Once an affected person went out, the spell was to be ended. Well... except for Pansy, as that would have been too easy. If a targeted person didn't leave the room, the spell would be lifted after one hour. Everything was set up and ready to run.

The meal started quietly, like all meals nowadays, and Ginny waited for a little time, trying to maintain a count of who drank when. When she was sure that Pansy and at least half of the concerned house students had drank the laced juice, she pointed her wand under the table, and uttered the strings of words that would launch the pandemonium.

The Slytherin table was a sight to behold, as almost all of them looked a wrinkled old lady, with almost all hair and teeth gone. The true Pansy Parkinson, having recognized her traits somewhat, shrieked and fled the Hall. One of the Pansies searched the Weasley twins with her eyes, and raised her glass to them. Just at that moment, though, in the same way as the Slytherins, the Gryffindors took the traits of Harry Potter.

And Ginny thought immediately that it hadn't been a good idea at all.

Even if everybody knew that it was a prank and found it fun. Even if young Megan could see her rumoured look-alike 'in the flesh' for the first time. Even if Ron and Hermione weren't too affected of seeing him there, although for different reasons. She, on the other hand, was having trouble concentrating on her plate, as all her house mate showed the face of her –supposedly– deceased love. She started to cry, and left the room, with many sets of identical green eyes following her and four of these recognizing her worry.

It was the evening, and she wandered a little before coming back in the common room. She had been crying when exiting the Great Hall, and wasn't feeling really well. Besides, her body was behaving strangely. She wasn't balanced as she usually was, and, feeling through her clothes, finally remarked some intimate changes in her anatomy. Her eyes wide, she grasped her hair and looked at it. It was black. That couldn't be! She started to panic. The potion effect was to stop as soon as you exited the hall. She had seen some other students exiting before her, and they had reverted to their original appearance. But she seemed to have kept Harry's appearance. She was starting to become mad, and she had to see the twins, to see if they did something wrong. Awkwardly running through the corridors, she frightened a good deal of persons who, even after seeing the prank, had also remarked that it ended at the Great Hall's doors. Arriving in front of Gryffindor entrance, she was surprised to see a startled Fred (or was it George?) keeping the portrait open.

"Harry?" as the others, Fred thought that the spell effect would have been ended when out of the Great Hall, and he was startled to see one rogue Harry launching to him and hugging him fiercely, sobbing.

"Fred! It didn't stop! I'm going mad!"

"Now, now... errr... Gin?"

"Yes, it's me. What did we do wrongly?"

"I don't know. We should perhaps head to the Hospital wing..."

“I don’t want to... what will Madam Pomfrey say?”

“She’ll perhaps be able to reverse the effect. Although, if you want to keep it...”

“No! I don’t want to fall in love with a mirror. I don’t understand! What was wrong?” She was on the edge of an emotional breakdown and they both knew it. He called inside the Tower for his brother, alerting Hermione at the same time, and the three of them brought her to the Hospital Wing. Hermione was even more curious about Ginny, and reminded her that she had missed their appointment. They rescheduled it for the next evening, while praying that nothing would happen again.

Unbeknownst to them, some of the people she had crossed, while running through the corridors, had alerted Dumbledore and McGonagall. The two Professors, after a short trip in Gryffindor common room, were following them, and overheard that part of the conversation. When they all arrived in the infirmary, Ginny, still in the form of Harry, was put into a bed, as far away from mirrors as possible. They gathered around it, and Dumbledore, after thanking and dismissing the twins, asked what happened.

Ginny explained the prank, something that made Albus chuckle, and Minerva smiled a little. Hermione didn’t smile, but she was storing information about pranks at the same time. All knowledge was interesting for her, and she decided to have a chat with the twins at some point.

Ginny also explained her lack of consciousness when she caught the Snitch, and the dreams that had plagued her the night afterwards. All this took them all the largest part of an hour, and they all saw the appearance spell effects disappear little by little from Ginny’s body. Hermione was interested by the train dreams, and sat back to silently ponder things, while McGonagall, with her Headmistress workload, wished Ginny a swift recovery and left the ward after she turned back into herself.

“I never remarked having so much work to do,” started Dumbledore, speaking about the Headmistress, “perhaps she had taken over already without my knowing?” he added with a wink.

Ginny chuckled. The old man had a talent for humour that always made her smile. He frowned afterwards, though.

“May I check something on you, Miss Weasley? It’s a detection spell, for... ahem... miscellaneous types of... possession.”

“Possession, sir?” She paled suddenly as memories from her previous year were brought to her conscious mind.

“Yes. Don’t worry; you don’t seem to have problems in that way. The spell has a wide range of detection, and we will just see if something magical had happened to your mind.”

“Hmmm...” she was thoughtful for a second, before agreeing. “Okay, but I want to know your conclusions, sir.”

“Agreed.”

The old Professor drew his wand and moved it in a complex pattern around Ginny’s head, while muttering strange words. As soon as he finished, the three of them could see some smoke taking form on top of her head. The smoke cloud slowly took form, and separated into two indistinct shapes before acquiring colour. One shape was lightening, getting a more and more defined white-blue tint. The other one was darkening, going towards pitch black. That one, though, seemed to be weaker and weaker as seconds ticked by. After a few seconds, the shapes began to take a humanoid form, with defined limbs and head.

The three of them began to feel curious about them, now. Ginny was attracted by the light figure, whereas the dark one repulsed her. Albus Dumbledore had some ideas about the spell results, but they had to wait for faces to be more defined before taking action.

After a full minute into the spell, they finally recognized the two characters. They already knew about the dark one, and the fact that it had almost turned transparent was a clear indication that her time being possessed by Tom Riddle was over. Dumbledore didn't even have to explain the colour meaning. But the other one was kind of a surprise. There, in front of them, was the smiling face of Harry Potter.

Albus reflected for a while, before sighing.

“What? What is it?” Hermione asked, too interested to remember to address her Professor correctly. Ginny looked at him expectantly, too.

“Well... there is a result I can give you, but I will have to check in my books to complete.”

“What can you tell us?”

“You saw Harry, right?”

“Yes, sir. Does that mean that he is possessing Ginny?”

“Well... in fact, no. But, by the colour of the smoke, it appears that he and Ginny shared what is called a soul bond.”

If the old Professor had expected a reaction, he was in for naught, as the two teenagers looked at him questioningly. After a while, Ginny asked “Hmmm... Professor? What is a soul bond?”

“Ah yes, of course. If you didn't know what it is, it's normal that you don't react to its mention.” He strengthened, switching to his ‘Professor’ mode. “You see, there are levels in relationships between people.

You have friendship, and then you have love. You can have as many friends as you can manage, and you can also have a few people you love. Of course, there also are levels in love, as you won't love your mother the same way you would your boyfriend. In all the persons in the world, though, you can have only one linked to you through what is called a soul bond.

Generally, it means that the two persons involved shared so much together that nothing could bring anyone to that level of closeness. And they usually love each other. The soul bond is also a link to each other's mind, so all this would explain the presence of little Harry here, and the colour of the smoke. Black is for forced possession, and that shade of bluish white is for soul bonds. In my entire career, it's the third I ever saw. There are other colours, but I think a full explanation may wait for another day. I also think that this bond may have forced you to assume Harry's features for a longer time than intended."

At these revelations, the two girls sat silently for a moment. Then, Hermione, true to her reputation, asked the question that Dumbledore feared. "What is it that you have to search in your books, Professor?"

"I can't really say now, Hermione, because that would be difficult if my interpretation was wrong. It may even cast everything we did this summer on the side."

Ginny looked the old man in the eye, feeling that it had something to do with Harry. She spoke softly, but with a pointed look. "Professor, if Harry is... d..." she couldn't force herself to say the word, as it still wasn't clear in her head if the whole episode had been a dream or not. She shook herself and started again.

"As Harry is not there anymore, you can tell us. I want to know."

"Well..." Albus Dumbledore was conscious that it could destroy the girl's life later on, especially if he was wrong, but he had always prized himself to be able to bring hope to everyone, so he continued. "What troubled me is the colour and thickness of the smoke. Normally, as Harry's... not there... the smoke should have been thinner, less defined, and more into grey. Another hint is that you actually have been possessed by something or someone during the match, and there were only two such possibilities, judging by the spell results."

Hermione, quick-witted as she was, put a hand on her mouth in astonishment, before asking. "You don't mean... He can't!"

“What? What?” Ginny was somewhat lost, before she caught on her Professor’s words and her friend’s attitude. “Harry?” she uttered faintly, turning towards the still present cloud of smoke, then towards the Transfiguration Professor.

“Yes, Miss Weasley. I will have to do some research to prove that, but it may be possible that Harry is alive.”

She didn’t faint this time, but collapsed in a heap of relieved sobs. She had felt this since Harry’s supposed death. She had felt a tug at her heart, and now, Merlin knew where he was!

To be continued in next chapter: To Throw a Ball...

The meeting of the minds done,  
Victory their way has gone.  
Mating, now? Someone’s missing...  
Review, I’ll let the miss sing.

## Chapter 17 – To Throw a Ball

“Here! Pass to me!”

“Shoot! Shoot!”

“Gooooaaal!”

The shouts were coming from an abandoned lot near the school. The five teenagers were playing a downgraded form of football, and were having fun doing so. Even with the cold weather, they were running, pushing a deflated ball around, and were globally having a good time together. As they weren't many, even the more scholarly-oriented of them were playing. Even if Gabriel hadn't known the rules at first, he had quickly adapted and stopped being distracted by every golden item on the ground. As Tamara often said, it always paid to have a body in good state. *Mens sana in corpore sano*, as the Romans said. They had taken the habit of running around their respective lot each morning, and were as fit as one can be.

After two hours of pushing the ball around, the state of said ball was too deteriorated for them to be able to continue playing, so they left the premises. It was Sunday afternoon, right before Halloween, and they had already finished their respective homework. So, standing aimlessly near the now empty field, they discussed about their options, the elapsed weeks, and the incoming festivities.

“So, what are we going to do, now? We have a few hours before having to return home.”

“We could go to the arcades?”

“I'd rather not. Last time, the owner practically threw us out because he didn't like that we had been winning. I'm not putting money in his machines again, for a long time anyway.”

“Movies?” proposed Jason.

“Nothing interesting that we didn't see already.”

“Pub?” asked a mischievous Kevin.

Tamara answered with a scowl “They are not open yet, and you know we aren’t allowed in anyway.”

“Okay. Then, we can discuss about what to do next week end.”

“Why not? But I’d rather get cleaned some.”

“Me too. We can meet at my place; I know my parents aren’t home tonight anyway.” Jason said, quite sadly. “They are at a political meeting. Again.”

“Deal?” Kevin asked.

“Deal.” Everyone answered, before going home.

Half an hour afterwards, they all were in Jason’s home, in the comfortable lounge.

“So, any idea for Halloween?” Joan started.

“We could sing at the church choir.” Tamara, whose mother was doing exactly that, proposed.

“We can spend the night playing games.” Kevin said.

“I’m not sure about playing any of Kevin’s games anymore.” Gabriel countered.

Sensing an argument brewing, Joan proposed the first idea out of her mind. “How about helping the local kids getting candies?”

“What do you mean? What do they do?” Gabriel was still unaware of many things running in the world, and his friends had to update him on a regular basis. That particular Halloween custom was explained to him, while Jason got them some refreshments.

After the explanation, Tamara started again "You know that we are quite old to ask candies."

"I didn't say getting candies ourselves, but helping the kids fetching them, keeping them in check in the darkened streets, and all that sort of things."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture. We'll get split, though. I was more thinking about doing things together."

"Perhaps, but we will also be able to disguise ourselves, and enjoy that. I always wanted to dress as a vampire." Kevin's eyes were shining.

Bending towards Tamara, he added something in her ear, which made her gasp, then giggle. Catching her furtive glances in his direction, Gabriel asked "What? What did he say?"

"Ahem... you see... disguise and all... you... well..." She was smiling at the same time, and Gabriel quickly caught the meaning.

"No way!"

"Come on, Gabriel, I'm sure you'd make a perfect one." Kevin pressed on.

"I'm not dressing like that; you all know I don't want it!"

"You'd make a perfect one! You never disguised yourself before, that's the occasion!"

"I already disguised myself, thank you very much. In the ghost ride, this summer!"

"That was you?" Jason looked at him with his eyes wide. Until now, he and Joan had been watching the exchange, not knowing what it was about, but suspecting that Gabriel wouldn't be happy.

“What do you mean, you were there?”

“Well, yes, once. Some friends – well, rather some kids of my parent’s friends, who I got cornered with – wanted to go there because of a good monster. I accompanied them, and I admit I was scared, but I never linked you to that. You had a good disguise, though.”

“See? You’d make a perfect one...” Kevin charged again.

“I had a good disguise, because of the circumstances! I don’t want to do that, you know.”

“Okay, okay, perhaps you’ll change your mind.”

“I’m sure I won’t. Well... I’d like to change my mind, but not like this.”

“We will see. About that, have you thought about the healing methods we spoke about, two weeks ago?”

“Yes. I bought some booklets about meditation, yoga, and martial arts, but I didn’t have time to read them.”

“We should try to read them together. After all, from what I read in a science magazine once, meditating can help to sort one’s mind quite efficiently. They even hinted to a better efficiency in work. In our case, that would be better grades. What do you think, guys?” Kevin was, as always, over-enthusiastic on his new idea, and it was difficult not to be drawn by it.

Always the one very organized, Joan spoke at that moment. “From our schedule, I think that a weekly meeting would be good, on Wednesdays afternoon. Or the week-end, but let’s try to keep that free, or else we wouldn’t have anymore ‘free time’.”

“And we can meet here.” Jason said. “Even if my parents hold one of their meetings, we can take the back door and go up my room quickly.”

“Deal!” Kevin was ecstatic, and turned with Gabriel. “Have you thought about your tattoo yet?”

Disturbed by the change of topic, Gabriel stayed silent for a moment, remembering, before answering.

Flashback: a week and a half ago...

Gabriel was running. He and his friends had decided that it was worth it, and, even if they didn't live in the same neighbourhoods, each of them forced oneself to get up a little earlier than was necessary, to run around the blocks for half an hour. After two days, Gabriel and Joan had also remarked that they could meet each other, and run together for a short while, because they lived not that far from one another. To get there, though, Gabriel had to cross the public zoo, which was thankfully open, and also free of charge. He had always quickly passed in front of the cages, but never run outright so that the animals wouldn't be frightened. He had never really paid attention to them, though. He just knew that he passed in front of some tropical birds at some point, a closed house that proclaimed it contained snakes, and a large enclosed ward containing felines.

That day, though, the vision that caught his eyes made him stop.

There, on his right, in the ward, a lion was eating. Well, the great feline was trying. The zoo employees generally passed the meat through a kind of tube in the wall, and it was dropped to the ground inside the ward. Today, though, one of the lion was hungry and had decided not to wait for the meat to fall, but was searching the tube end with its maw. The fact that had caught Gabriel's attention was that, due to the height of the tube's end, the lion was practically standing, its side towards him, its paws on the wall, and its bloodied jaws opened. Recognition struck the teenager like lightning, and he stumbled back, trying to find a seat.

Soon after, he realized that the standing lion was a sign of his past, and decided to do like with the girl and the bird, and spent several days trying to draw it, several times. It was always almost perfect. Grace and Joan, who also knew the zoo, found his drawing flawless, but he couldn't refrain from feeling something missing. So, he started to experiment with his drawings. After all, he had drawn a mythical bird before, why not other legendary creatures?

He started to draw a centaur-like creature having the lion body, but quickly noticed that it was farther from his recollection than the lion alone.

He also found a book on mythical creatures in his school library, and searched the pages, quite unsuccessfully. Not that the book was incomplete, but rather that nothing really called to him. The only idea he found was a picture, from which he caught only a glimpse while browsing the book rapidly. The glimpse of feathers made his heart accelerate, so he turned the pages backwards until he stumbled on the Pegasus picture. A horse with wings! He remembered suddenly that Kevin had talked about such a horse when they had been discussing about tattoos. Of course! He could try to add wings to the lion. Reflecting upon that, he found that it was the perfect thing to do, and started to draw winged lions on the fourth sketchpad Grace had been forced to buy him because of his drawing frenzies.  
End of flashback...

“Yes. I was first drawn to get myself a phoenix, but I think it would be more... appropriate? For Tamara.” Seeing everyone's questioning look, he explained that, in the book he had read about mythical creatures, phoenixes were birds closely related to fire, and their legend say that they can be reborn from the flames. “And Tamara wanted something fiery, so I gave her one of my coloured drawings of the bird, because the ones in the book weren't good.”

“You must either have a large ego or a good talent to criticize book drawings, Gabriel.” Joan said with a smile.

“Take your pick, milady, I won’t mind.” Smiling, he rose, bowed to her, and went to fetch his sketchpad, which was in his satchel near the wall. Opening it to the last page, he showed it to them, saying “That’s what I want for a tattoo.”

They all gasped. They knew that he was drawing things, and that he was pretty good. They didn’t know that, for the whole week, he had been in the zoo every evening, looking at the lions and taking them in, memorizing their habits and way of moving. The drawing they saw was Gabriel’s current pride, as it showed the lion in the very position that had caught his attention, standing like one could in a coat-of-arms. And it had feathery wings, semi-opened as if about to take flight. It was so life-like that they thought it was going to roar. Their awe was sudden interrupted by Jason.

“That’s not possible, that’s not possible...”

Joan elbowed him, and, laughingly, said “Of course it’s not possible, a winged lion, you think! But it’s a drawing! Don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

Jason looked at her absently, and said “You don’t understand. I saw... I’d better show you.”

He rose and beckoned to them. They went upstairs, through multiple and large stairways. Jason’s parents were very well furnished, and the house was huge. They went in the attic, which could have held a whole flat, and which wasn’t even dusty like all attics use to be. Jason directed them towards a set of shelves. With books. Some seemed really old, and reminded Gabriel of those he had seen in the old man’s bookstore. Jason took a large tome, and dropped it carefully on a nearby desk, before going to light the desk lamp. Apparently, the attic could be used to study the family’s archives.

However, after having lit the old petrol lamp properly, he snatched at the glass tube that was to surround the flame, and missed it. It crashed on the floor, broken. They all crouched and tried to recover glass parts around the impact point. Joan found one under a chair, and cut herself while picking it up.

She stood up with a yelp, and everyone looked at her concernedly. Gabriel looked at her bleeding thumb, and asked suddenly. "Show me."

Not thinking about it, she showed him her wound, and he looked at it intently for a few seconds. Just as she was to get her hand back, possibly to heal it downstairs, he suddenly bent forwards and licked it.

Blood.

Blood!

He had forgotten, in his comfortable months, how he had lived on the streets in the beginning of the summer. He had forgotten that he had survived by eating raw animals and drinking their blood. The drop of blood he had just licked was so much more powerful than that, that he almost fainted on the spot, before shaking himself awake.

Joan jerked her hand away, and was ready to berate him for such a strange behaviour, but she looked at her hand, and the wound was closed now. Storing the episode in her memory, in the space reserved to 'strange occurrences relative to Gabriel,' she reflected that this space was going to need a sorting someday soon. She then turned towards the others, who had been finishing storing the shards away, and were waiting for the two of them.

Smiling lightly, she spoke. "You were to say, Jason?"

"This book, as almost all the ones in this shelf, is related to my family." Jason started. "Almost nobody is interested in them nowadays, but I recall browsing them when I was a kid."

Kevin mumbled something that sounded like "bookworm" but everyone followed. Jason continued.

"My father's family had its roots very deep in the country, and some of these books relate stories about my ancestors. Some are hideous, some are really beautiful, and some are just plain and boring. I

particularly liked the one with..." Realizing he was babbling over his memories, he shook himself, opened the book, and started talking again.

"These books not only tell stories from direct ancestors and family lines, but also from some interesting cousins. And there is one of them who, well... you'll see." he paused, frowning, turning page after page, before landing on one.

They all gasped.

There, on half the page, was the exact same drawing that they had seen downstairs.  
At Hogwarts...

There was chaos. There was pandemonium. And then, there was the Hogwarts' Great Hall after such an announcement. Most of the boys looked annoyed, and were expressing their annoyance vocally, while almost all the girls were ecstatic, and shrieked to one another. The seemingly unimportant sentence from the Headmistress had started it all.

"...and on next Saturday, there will be a Halloween Ball."

The girls were speaking about dress robes and boys, and the boys were speaking about... dress robes and girls. Neville was smiling goofily, holding Parvati's hand. Parvati was chatting excitedly with her twin, who had just switched tables after the announcement. Everybody was also happy that, for the students to be able to prepare for the Ball, Wednesday afternoon had been freed for a trip to Hogsmeade.

The only ones that weren't making too much noise were, for the most part, the already 'official' couples that had only needed a nod to each other. Still, that didn't prevent those couples to participate to the surrounding ruckus. The other uninterested persons were those for who the Ball was of little interest, mainly single students from Ravenclaw. And Hermione.

As it had been the end of the meal anyway, she just left the hall towards the Library. She had no use of a Ball, and wasn't looking forward to it. On her way, she came across a certain Potion Master, who had exited the Great Hall through the staff door, thus gaining a lead in navigating the castle. He wanted to spend the remaining of his otherwise free afternoon with a research project he had, about the Mind Restoring potion, especially on how to replace the unicorn blood. That way, he reflected, he could explain the Longbottoms revival with another explanation than that of a miracle.

When they met in the corridor, there was a small pause, before he they spoke at the same time, uttering the same words.

“What a useless event!”

They smiled.

“I'm going to do some potion research.” He started. “Interested?”

As she had already asked information about the procedure needed for her project, he had magically expanded his office, leaving her a small place in it for her cauldron to simmer without school interference. Her eyes lit up at the prospect, and she readily agreed. They went downstairs, chatting amiably about reagents, unaware of the malicious pair of eyes following them from inside an alcove down the corridor.

Megan left the Great Hall with the other first years. As it was their first Ball in school, and as many of them were muggle-born, they didn't know how to dress and act. They were thinking about staying in their room during the ball, when an older student from Slytherin approached the group.

“Good evening, young Gryffindors. Sorry to have overheard you, but I daresay that the fabled courage of your House may not show itself if you weren't to participate in the Ball.”

Such an announcement left the younger students agape, and Blaise Zabini smiled to indicate the comical nature of it, before turning to address one of them. "Megan, can I talk to you privately?"

After curious gazes from her year mates, she nodded. She then waited for the others to politely leave, something they didn't do, undoubtedly being too obtuse to understand. After a few uncomfortable seconds, Blaise took her hand and led her around the nearest corner before addressing her.

"Are there your friends?"

"No, only tag-along dogs that I transfigured into Gryffindors for my own pleasure."

Her answer left him open-mouthed. Unknown to many students, the shy girl who had been noticed as Harry Potter's younger and female version wasn't really shy. On the Sorting ceremony, she hadn't known where she was, who the people were, and why the candles were floating in the air. In her previous life, though, she was clever and quick-witted, something that had benefited her recent studies and relationships. It was now clear to the whole Gryffindor house that she wasn't said Potter's sister or look-alike or whatever. The rest of the school had to discover her mischievousness, though, like Blaise was now. He shook himself while she was smiling innocently at him.

"You wanted to talk to me?"

"Actually, yes. I wanted to ask you something, but I have to make something clear first. You are beautiful, and now I know that you are not a dim-witted bigoted Gryffindor, and..." She had started to blush at the beginning of the sentence, but quickly found her natural skin colour at its end. She prepared to answer this, but he silenced her and continued.

"...and I want you to know that it's not the main reason why I wanted to ask you to go to the ball with me."

Now she was lost. Seeing her expression, he clarified.

“I want to promote the house relationships, and, despite what you might think, most Slytherin still think of you as Potter’s sister. So, as a gesture of friendship between us and Gryffindor, I wanted to invite you to the Halloween Ball.”

“But... but... what if...”

“I don’t pressure you into it. In fact, if someone else ask you, go ahead and go with him. Unless you don’t like the person, though, then you have the perfect excuse.” He added the last part with a smirk.

Seeing that she was still thoughtful, even if smiling a little at his joke, he continued. “Despite the diplomatic goal of this invitation, I suspect that I might like knowing you better, and I look forward to it, too. But I still won’t force you. In any way.”

“You mean it? Like you said? It’s not one of the Slytherin tricks?”

“It’s not. We Slytherin may have tricked people in the past, but I try to smooth them, and this is part of the plan. With benefits.” He added with another smile.

She slapped at his arm playfully, but he continued nonetheless. “After all, I’m a proficient dancer, and you might even like me.”

She looked at him with an inscrutable expression on her face, before smiling and answering. “I might. If you are usually this honest with people, I might.”

“See you at the Ball, then?”

“Yes.”

And they separated. This time, there had been no hidden eyes to spy on them.

Later, in a remote cottage...

Lord Voldemort was satisfied. True, the summer months had been hectic, with Draco's uncovering and spillings, causing his ranks to reduce drastically. But now, he was using this little cottage, its inside magically enlarged, as his base of operations, and he had mastered the Fidelius charm to hide it to enemy eyes. And his link to the students loyal to him had just told him of an interesting event.

"Jugson, I want you to round all my faithful followers, we are going to strike the old fool while he thinks that everything is in control. I want them to tremble, and to spend unnecessary time and money finding us. Give our friends appointment here on Wednesday morning."

As he didn't want his followers to be discovered easily anymore, he had stopped marking them. So, to call for them, he had to rely on external help. That's why Jugson had to travel to each of the involved persons to deliver his message, thus taking much more time to bring them all.

After the man left, though, another person entered the room, although that one wasn't wearing the usual black robe that his followers usually wore, only black baggy pants and sweatshirt, and black trainers as well. He couldn't even say if that person was male or female, as the person's face was smooth without being feminine. He or she had jet black hair cut short, and black eyes.

"Who are you, and how did you enter?"

Voldemort wasn't afraid. After all, he wasn't the current Dark Lord without a reason, and could hold his own against almost everyone, the only notable exception being Albus Dumbledore. But he was wary of the intruder nonetheless, because the person obviously sneaked in his cottage without activating his traps and detection spells. The voice that answered him was in between a regular man's voice and a woman's.

"Who I am is of no importance, as how I entered. What is important is how you are coping with our little game."

Voldemort didn't understand, and it unnerved him greatly. The person opposite him looked around the room with distaste showing. "For the moment, you may refer to me as Thirteen."

"Why would I..."

Thirteen didn't let him finish his sentence, and, looking him in the eye, said "We'll meet again."

The intruder disappeared, without the usual sound or magic residue indicating a magical travelling mean. At the same time, a book materialized itself at Voldemort's feet. Picking it up and browsing through it, he saw numerous potion recipes and spells directions. From their descriptions, these were of the darkest sort, but he didn't know them. Any of them.

The concept was new to him, and it added to his reaction. Voldemort was fearing someone now, for the first time of his life. In a large attic, full of books...

"Jason, what does it mean?"

"I don't know, Gabriel. Perhaps you knew about him. Or it may be a coincidence..."

"I don't believe in coincidences anymore." Kevin interrupted. "What does the book say about this?"

"There, it says that said cousin, Godfroy Frederick As a' Loch, chose this... 'animal' as his personal crest." Jason stopped reading, and browsed the text rapidly, commenting on it as he went. "The author hadn't known him personally, and he wrote only what people said about him. Something weird is that, contrarily to most of the family members, his date and place of death is not indicated. See? Born in 920 at the hamlet of Hog's Meade, he practically disappeared without a trace at the age of 20, and nobody knew where he went. As

if... by magic.” Jason had been reading, and the last two words, while taken from the book, were said while he was looking at Gabriel.

After an uneasy pause, Gabriel shrugged, and motioned Jason to continue reading.

“There are also unverifiable facts about Goderick, as he liked to be called, some of them bordering on the legend. Some of the people interviewed said that he was unnaturally good with swords, but, them being peasants, it could be possible that he merely impressed them with a trick or two. Some said that he was nosy and asked questions about everything. Some others, although not sober enough to truly be believable, said that he could change form, transforming into strange beasts, and a few even muttered that he fought a dragon. It ends there. You see, there’s no need to be worried, it’s all a bunch of... Gabriel?”

Jason had raised his head towards his friend when he finished reading, and the others in the room, intent on listening, hadn’t noticed the teen’s expression. Gabriel’s face was a mix of sadness, pain, and concentration. He was holding his head in his left hand, visibly suffering, while looking intently at his right. When his friends called to him a second time, he raised his head, and released a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“What?”

“You were... preoccupied?”

“Honestly... yes.” Gabriel looked like he was searching for words, before launching himself. “I don’t remember it all, but I know I knew something about this Godric...”

“Goderick.” Kevin corrected absently.

“Yeah, whatever. And Hog’s Meade. But I can’t remember. His family name doesn’t ring a bell, though. It’s the same as yours, Jason?”

“Yes. As it is written today, Asaloch doesn’t mean anything, but you saw how it was written a millennium ago? It’s Gaelic, and it means ‘of the lake’. And don’t start me up on legends about the Knights of the Round Table, and Merlin. God knows I’ve been subjected to them each time I told this.”

“Really, Jason? Once more shouldn’t disturb you, then? Is it true, anyway?” Kevin was half-laughing, half-curious.

Jason sighed before answering. “Truthfully, I don’t know. I explored all our family records and, as far as I can go, nothing is said about that topic.”

“Too bad, that. We could have played the knights, and Gabriel would play Merlin, of course.” Kevin was laughing outright, now, but Joan was looking at Gabriel intently.

He had been looking at Jason with that faraway look in his eyes again. And muttering. Approaching him, she could only hear something in the like of “Merlin... knows... Merlin knows...” before he was startled awake again, and smiled faintly at her.

“You must think I’m a loona... errm... a loony?” Not even registering her denial, he lowered his head and muttered again. “Where did that come from?”

When he looked up again, seeing her sympathetic eyes, he said “I’m sorry; my memories are turning up and down around my head. I can’t make head or tails from them.”

She held his gaze, and spoke in a soft voice. “You know, Gabriel, I think that speaking about that Goderick...”

“Godric.” He corrected. “His name’s Godric. Godric Grif...” He shut his eyes, and held his head in his hands for a few seconds, while she and the others looked at him in wonder. But he raised his head again, shaking it. “I’m sorry, you were saying?”

“Even if you won’t like the idea, you’ll admit that speaking about God... ric, and about magic in general, helps your memory.”

He reluctantly nodded, fearing the next sentence.

“I really think you should do like Kevin proposed downstairs. You know? About your disguise for Halloween?”

He sighed, defeated. Perhaps something good could come out of it? He had a bad feeling about it, though.

“Okay, you win. I’ll dress as a wizard.”  
Hogsmeade, Wednesday afternoon...

The flow of students was continuous, but, unlike the usual Hogsmeade visits, the main target wasn’t Honeyduke, the candy shop, nor The Three Broomsticks, the pub, nor even Zonko’s, the joke shop. Today, the main attraction was Gladrag’s, the robes shop. It wasn’t as furnished as Madam Malkin’s, but the students were literally swarming the place, to the point of the shop having an entry queue. The day was a success for the shop, as even the first years have been allowed to be present at the Ball.

Suddenly, many popping sounds could be heard around Hogsmeade centre. Several shapes in black robes and white masks had apparated, and their sight caused a moment of uncertainty in the student body. How could that be?

When spells began to fly in the area, though, the students quickly understood what was underway, and scattered with the cries of “Death Eaters! Death Eaters!”

The Death Eaters, being younger and less ‘experienced’ than the old ones, didn’t use Unforgivables, but other painful curses. Several students fell on the floor, bleeding because of the Cutting curse. Others were thrown by strong explosions, either directly and indirectly, and laid unconscious near fallen constructions.

Something that the Death Eaters hadn't foreseen, though, because of their lack of spies in the higher Ministry spheres, was that Albus Dumbledore and Arthur Weasley had seen that the visit wasn't to be interrupted by external elements, whichever they were. As soon as the black-robed wizard had started to cast offensive spells, a warning sound had been heard in Dumbledore's office, as well as in a room in the Ministry, where several Aurors were on remote guard duty. The target already in mind, they all apparated in the area and entered the fray.

In the indescribable free-for-all that ensued, some Aurors fell, victims of the Reducto spell and Cutting curse, but not without taking some Death Eaters out also, through a good use of the Stupefy spell. The remaining Death Eaters, not used to direct confrontations and seeing that they were losing, fled the premises by quickly apparating away. Dumbledore could have prevented their retreat, but the students were still there and a cornered enemy is always more dangerous, so he allowed most of the Death Eaters to leave.

Afterwards, the injured were sent to the hospital wing, the worst cases by portkey, and two Aurors who had field healing skills were sent to help Madam Pomfrey with the sudden influx of people. As the Aurors mostly used spells that didn't wound, the fallen Death Eaters weren't to be sent to the infirmary, and they were quickly sorted, searched, their wand and other paraphernalia removed. The four people that lied on the floor then, unmasked, unrobed, and tied with magically-conjured ropes, weren't fearful at all anymore. Although they were frightened.

On the spot, they asked for the prisoners' names and station. Two refused to answer, but, as an Auror told them that they would be given Veritaserum later at the Ministry anyway, they started to cooperate.

In a dark alleyway on the side of the battlefield, a fifth Death Eater had been made prisoner by Severus Snape, who had been alerted by Dumbledore and had joined the battle quickly. The prisoner wasn't just any Death Eater. As both were members of the 'old crew' of the Death Eaters, Albert Jugson and Severus Snape knew each other. So, when the Potion Master started to question the Death Eater, said

Death Eater couldn't refrain from spitting in his face, to the shouts of "Traitor! We all know everything about you now, and you'll die if you set a step out of your precious castle!"

After that incident, witnessed by Dumbledore, the old man took Snape out of the alley after silencing the prisoner, and they discussed about an idea he just got, while Jugson was struggling against the magical ropes that were tying him. Unsuccessfully.

"Severus?"

"Yes, Albus?"

"I have been thinking, recently, and the way we are dealing with Voldemort doesn't seem sufficient to finish him."

"What do you mean? We have him cornered, and just got some more of his troops."

"I know, but as long as we can't get to him directly, he will always regroup and be a danger to the population, whether wizarding or muggles."

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Well, you see, our liberties are too restricted in that endeavour. Officially and legally, we won't be able to kill him in the end. I remember..." he shook his head, trying to force himself to continue "...when I defeated Grindewald, we both used the Unforgivables."

"And that implies..."

"Yes, old friend. Without going as low as to go to our enemy's level, it is time we turn a little of his strategy and ideas against him."

"What do you propose?"

Albus Dumbledore, turning towards the distant form of Jugson, addressed his Potion Master. "Do you remember being a spy?"

Catching the hidden meaning, Severus stood in front of his former Headmaster. "Albus, he is unreliable, and fanatically loyal to him. You can't suggest him being our spy."

"On the contrary, I can. The only drawback is that he mustn't have his own mind."

Severus Snape couldn't believe what he heard. Albus Dumbledore, the great wizard, champion of the light side, was suggesting altering one of his enemies' mind? As he wasn't as narrow-minded as some people he knew, he suddenly understood why the old man said all this to him. He smiled.

"And who do you want to manage the puppet?"

"I was hoping... you."

Snape was mildly shocked, now. It was one thing to speak about someone taking another's free will, but it was another thing altogether to be asked to do so.

"I will have to think about it, Albus. If that comes to the Ministry, we could be in a bad position."

"Yes, I know. Even with a friend at the position, the general public's reaction could be disastrous if a leak was to be found. So I hope this will have no witness. Still, as Potion Master, I also have a request. If you accept, you will have to prepare a potion so that the possession will be undetected. You know which charm I'm talking about?"

"Yes, and I understand, Albus. I'll give both my replies tomorrow."

"Thank you. I will move him through the nearest hidden passage, to Hogwarts' hidden cells."

"I think it would be wise, yes."

“As one of my teacher said once, Severus: I’m old, therefore I’m wise.”

“Very funny, Albus. Have fun.”

“Mobilicorpus.”

Northern London, at the same time...

Gabriel woke up. He and his friends were in Jason's attic once more, and they had been trying to practise the meditation techniques found in the booklets. Quite unsuccessfully. Not only weren't they supple enough to position themselves in the miscellaneous positions, they also couldn't concentrate to forget their surroundings. Especially with the pain in their joints. At some point, though, Gabriel had suddenly caught his head, and, with a pained grimace, passed out. Now, five minutes and a glass of water thrown in his face later, he woke up.

“What happened?” Joan was as anxious as the others, but, knowing him a little better than the others, she felt somewhat responsible when something occurred to him. Which was quite often, she noticed.

“Unnnngh... I don't remember.” Gabriel answered. “I was there, thinking how stupid it was to stay on our knees, and I suddenly felt pain in my forehead. But it is gone now.” He didn't add that he had felt a strange feeling of anger while he was out.

“Good. Now, we can perhaps try something else? What about martial arts?” Tamara was partial about the sport version of meditating.

“I don't know, Tam. I was well relaxed just now.” Jason countered.

Gabriel looked at him, and spoke. “You have found your method then. Congratulations, but I'd like something else, because I almost have strained ankles now.”

Tamara laughed, and spoke again. "Okay, now. Gabriel, pass me the book about that. Now, now... what do they suggest?"

They spent the remaining of the hours of sunlight going into the different positions of the kata. However, as the book indicated, they couldn't meditate at the same point, because they had to practise the movements. Meditation was to come naturally after they mastered the sequence of moves, something they promised to do in each other's free time, after running in the morning, for instance.

Four days later...

The teenagers had been split with a group of three or four kids each, and were having a good time directing them from house to house, participating in the cries of "Trick or treat." True to his dare, Gabriel had dressed as a wizard, and nothing bad had come from it. Nobody they saw that evening, kids and adults alike, knew his turmoil, so, apart from being nervous the whole time, everything went rather well.

Until now.

Following the street, they had knocked to every house's door, and either people gave candies, or participated freely to the custom of being tricked. These persons had played along; some asked to imitate ducks, while others were asked to make a hideous grimace.

The large man who opened the creaky door wasn't happy to see them. Obviously, he had been startled by the door knock, and had spilled tea on his otherwise white shirt. That's why he opened the door in a foul mood, his moustache quivering with fury. He addressed the kids, who were too frightened to run. Gabriel was a little behind, as it was the kids' game to play and he was there almost only to oversee them.

"Who do you think you are? Some freaks that can knock on honest people's door? Can't we have a moment of peace without being harassed by the like of you? I'll show you!" and the man got a knout that was 'decorating' his entry wall, and went to the kids, menacing.

The man either really wanted to hurt them, or it was only intimidation. In any case, Gabriel reacted immediately, and ran in front of the kids.

Angry and frightened at the same time, he raised his hands protectively. The next thing he knew, the man was flying backwards, as if knocked by a sudden and strong wind. Not having time for indecision or explanations, he pushed the kids out of the garden, and far from the house. As soon as the house was out of view, they stopped, and he hugged the younger kids, while they all cried in relief.

As it was pretty late anyway, they stopped their quest for candies, and, after Gabriel shared the loot in equal parts for the kids, he comforted them a last time, and saw that each of them got home safely. Each time, he explained the incident to the parents, and that's very tired that he finally arrived home. He quickly changed, and went to bed. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

He made a strange dream that night. He was a lion, and was running besides a beautiful lioness around a lake. They were leaping happily together, and he was making higher and higher bounds.

When he woke up early afterwards, he felt something weird on his body, and, lighting the lamp, found that his skin had been replaced by fur.

Yellow fur.

Like a lion's.

Restraining the panicked shout that menaced to escape his throat, he thought hard about the situation, while trying to pick the hair out, unsuccessfully. Nobody he knew could have played a prank of this nature, so it left only one alternative: he did it himself. He remembered his dream, and, strangely, felt that his current situation was linked to it. It stirred something in his memory, akin to all the stirrings related to his 'old life.' Remembering the episode of the eye, he closed it, and concentrated. He felt his skin prickling, but he opened his eyes immediately, and nothing happened. He would have to concentrate better than that.

Five minutes afterwards, nothing was done, and he was starting to lose his nerve. He really didn't want to be discovered in that state. He didn't want to be seen as a freak, like one of the 'monsters' that had

been shown in the fair for a short time. The man had had an arm protruding from his chest instead of his shoulder, and his right leg was shorter than the other at least a foot in length. He had even pretended being a wizard and that he had a travelling mishap. The show hadn't attracted that much people, and the few who went there commented on the freaky nature of it, and the fact that it had surely been simulated. The monster show had left shortly afterwards.

Gabriel suddenly remembered the isolated rooms, and, he reflected that it would be the perfect place to be isolated while he tried to solve the problem at hand. So to speak. Checking that the ring was still on his finger, he said "Safehaven."

Once there, he remarked that nothing had changed and the rooms were in the same spotless state, except for the trunk of books, and the diary with his haphazardly scattered pages of translation on the desk. He immediately resolved to come back at a later date to sort it all out.

He concentrated hard on his problem for half an hour, and started to reflect at the same time. He wanted to have a normal skin, because he didn't want people intruding in his perfect life; people like Tamara, who would undoubtedly pry him for information if he showed up with a yellow fur. Thinking of Tamara skewed his concentration. He got a tingling feeling that stopped shortly afterwards, and got a shock when he opened his eye. He was looking at his arms and they were black!

Stunned at first, he thought "That must have been because of my thinking about Tamara, I should concentrate better." Besides, the transformation had woken some memories of his. He suddenly was able to remember an old book content, at least a small part of it. And it spoke about what he just achieved. Self-transfiguration.

As he had decided, he concentrated better, trying not to think about anything else than turning back to his own skin. After fifteen minutes of meditating and a prickling feeling all over, he finally got his normal complexion back. Now that he thought about it, he could pass incognito in the streets or in the school, if he could change his skin. He decided not to push his luck further, and returned to Grace's home through the ring. While he was running afterwards, he reflected

about the fact that he could perhaps change his body also. He didn't have time to think much about it, though, because Grace had asked him to help her inspect the ghost ride, like they were doing periodically, and to start to prepare it for Christmas holidays. The park was always open on school holidays.

He verified the time before leaving, and, comparing to his watch, found that the kitchen clock was fifteen minutes late. Checking on the other clock in the lounge, he found out that it was his watch that was faulty. He set it up, and quickly forgot about it. He left with Grace soon afterwards, and totally forgot that he hadn't straightened his bed.

If he had done so, he would have remarked a long and golden feather in it.

The previous evening, in a large and magical castle...

After the distressing events of Hogsmeade, and the full day of Hospital wing that ensued for most of the victims, everyone had had only one thing in mind, rendering the teacher's task almost useless: the Ball.

Those who hadn't had the time or the determination to ask out their chosen one forced themselves to do so, especially after Hogsmeade events. As a result, very few students could be seen going to the Ball without a partner. But even those ones dressed better than usual to attend to the occasion.

In the Great Hall, the long house tables had been replaced by smaller round tables, beautifully decorated with an orange-and-black theme, including pumpkins. The walls displayed picture of Halloween-related scenes, and the ghosts were patrolling the premises, as happy as one could be.

The teachers were also invited, at least for the beginning dinner. Each of them had to watch over two tables, and that was a job in itself. As the students chose their table as well as their place, a hierarchy of likeliness showed itself, as the tables where Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Albus Dumbledore were seated seemed to get students faster than the others. On the other side, Severus Snape's

table gained them more slowly than others. It was faster than it would have been if he had stayed the infamous Potion Professor of the previous years, though. As it was, he had a few students not belonging to his house on his table. The social event, though, disgruntled him greatly, and, if he hadn't been asked to stay there by the Headmistress personally, he would have fled the lovey-dovey couples that seemed to have invaded the Great Hall. He seemed not to be the only one, though, as, when he looked around the room at one point during the four-course meal, he noticed the slumped frame of Hermione Granger. The girl didn't seem to have a 'significant other' at her side, and seemed to wait for the end of the meal to exit the boring room. He started to feel sorry for her, before shaking himself. Since when did he feel sorry for someone, and a young female student, on top of that? Neglecting the small voice telling him the answer, he returned to his own table and took a few points from a kissing couple. It wasn't even dessert, for Merlin's sake!

When the band arrived, after dessert, the tables were magically shrunk, so as to still be able to hold drinks, and the chairs were rearranged. The dance started slowly, like all dances, with only a few daring couples going on the freed place in the middle of the hall. Those included Ron and Luna, who were oblivious to the people around, and Fred and George, who started to dance together before inviting Katie and Angelina. Soon after, though, the atmosphere caught almost everyone there, and people danced freely. Thanks to the generally relaxed atmosphere in the school, more inter-houses couples could be seen dancing and having teenage fun. One of such couples, which could have been strange in other circumstances, was Blaise Zabini and Megan Prunner. They were dancing pretty well, exchanging good-natured remarks at the same time. They were dancing pretty well, exchanging good-natured remarks at the same time, and Blaise had been quite successful in his assessment of their dancing together smoothing Slytherin-Gryffindor relationships.

A few students, mostly Ravenclaw, not interested by the dance, left the hall quickly, as well as a few teachers. Ginny Weasley stayed for a time, wanting to keep company to her brothers, but she quickly found that she was too sad for not having Harry beside her to be able to dance, and that, apart from Ron and the twins, who were having a grand time, Percy was his usual bossy character. She left without

looking behind. Had she looked, she would have seen the glance exchanged across the room between McGonagall and Dumbledore. She would have noticed also that Ron and Luna stopped dancing and started to follow her, while staying in the distance.

She went for fresh air outside, in the inner patio, but quickly found that kissing couples were all around the place, and, avoiding them, she went on the grounds. The crescent moon was illuminating the well-kept grass, and the only sounds were made by the miscellaneous magical animals that Hagrid, groundskeeper and Professor of Care of Magical Creatures, kept for his classes. She shook herself, and walked towards the lake. On her way, she reflected that she had mastered each part of the animagus transformation successfully in the previous weeks, assisted by Albus Dumbledore, and that she could try it tonight.

She found a spot, under a tree, where she couldn't be seen from the castle doors, and concentrated. After a minute of straining her body, a powerful feline was in her place, panting slightly. Still for a moment, taking in her new perceptions and angle of vision, she went slowly, then faster, on a stroll around the lake. If she could have smiled and laughed like a human, she would have, as the feeling of freedom was exhilarating. She was also sad that a particular raven-haired and green-eyed boy couldn't do the same thing at the same time, even if she was feeling less lonely while running like that, as if the mere thought of him was bringing his soul next to her. She attributed it to her changed appearance, though. While running, she wasn't aware of two things. Firstly, even if lions weren't normally able to do so, she was crying freely, from the well of emotions that was overflowing in her. Secondly, there were four people looking at her from the castle doors.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Ron said, while holding Luna by the waist.

"Indeed, Ronald, indeed." Dumbledore answered, while McGonagall nodded.

Luna hummed happily, before adding, to the adult's astonishment. "They both are."

They stayed there, until the running animal came to a pause under a tree and Ginny Weasley emerged five minutes later, still not having noticed them. Then they left.

To be continued in next chapter: Escapades...

Now, their wild side starts showing,  
The dark one starts its acting,  
If you want a follow-up,  
Don't let review down: write up.

## Chapter 18 – Escapades

“Are you sure this is the place?”

“Yes, are you sure? It seems quite... unclean.”

“It is, and I assure you it is spotless. This is only a facade, and their tools are thoroughly germ-free.”

“How do you know?”

“I worked there for a month. Summer job. That’s how I got my second tattoo almost for free.”

Gabriel, Tamara, and Kevin were discussing on a walkway opposite to the place supposed to be a tattoo parlour. They had brought Gabriel’s drawings, and were as ready-to-go as one can be, given the circumstances. Joan and Jason had chosen not to interfere, and had stayed at Jason’s place. Besides, Grace and Tamara’s parents hadn’t exactly been informed of their escapade, and Joan and Jason played hosts to a virtual homework meeting.

The three of them finally decided to go on, and crossed the street, before entering the parlour proper. Contrarily to the outside suggested, and accordingly to Kevin’s prediction, the inside was clean and actually nice. Gabriel reflected that it seemed also more welcoming than the upscale one he had been into in the summer.

“Hi Kevin!”

“Hi Matthew!”

Kevin was approached by a tall man in his twenties, and they hugged like males do between themselves, with one arm only. Kevin turned back towards his friends, and introduced the store owner’s son, cashier, and occasionally tattoo artist. The presentations made, as there weren’t many customers in sight, Matthew led them through a tour of the small premises, and they got a good glance at the inks and instruments designed to mark them permanently, and the two tattoo

artists who were there already, one of them finishing a monochromatic rose on a plump girl's lower back. They also saw the proposed drawings, but, truth be told about Gabriel, it was true he drew better than most. At least things that held his attention: he wasn't sure to be able to accurately draw one of his teachers, for instance.

Matthew finished the tour by leading them towards the wall of proposed drawings. "Kevin told me that you were new to the fine art of tattoos? To tell you myself, I'm not as mad tattoo-wise as some parlours owners and their families may be. I only got one." He had lowered his voice for the last sentence, and raised his sleeve to show a finely tattooed panther. Shrugging his sleeve free, he rose and asked, encompassing the wall with his arm. "So, what will suit your need?"

"Actually, Matt, they have their own... artwork... with them." Kevin said, with a twinkle in his grey eyes.

The young man was nonplussed, but, when he saw the proffered drawings, his eyes opened wide. "Wow." Gabriel blushed a little, but smiled proudly nonetheless, while the man was praising his work. "I mean... wow. I always see some kids wanting their own work on them, but none of them could draw to save their life. This is... different. And better! I wonder... who drew these?"

Kevin looked intently towards Gabriel, who raised his hand timidly. "Me, sir."

"Congratulations, young man, and please... no 'sir' here. The only 'sir' I know is my grandfather. And you can call me Matt. Anyone drawing like this can call me Matt. I have a question though. Can we... I mean... would you let us use it for future tattoos? To put it in our catalogue?"

Gabriel thought about it for some time, but two things annoyed him the most. First, these were part of his long-forgotten memories, and he didn't want just 'anybody' to wear them. On the other side, people who had known him could recognize them and he could find his place

back in the world. He couldn't decide, but the last straw was about one of his numerous discussions with Joan. He wanted the tattoo to be personalized. If no one could ever have the same, that would be better. Well... except perhaps for descendants of this long dead cousin of Jason's family.

He turned towards Tamara and explained his reasoning, before asking her. "Do you want to keep the phoenix for yourself?"

After a few seconds, she answered "Actually, it's not mine; it's yours. I can't stop you from drawing it, can I?"

"Of course, but I spoke about tattoos, and this drawing in particular."

"I don't care. Actually, if other people want to have it too, I'll be flattered to have been the first to have it."

"Okay, then." answered Gabriel, before turning towards the store keeper, explaining that his drawing of a flying lion would be kept private, but they could use the other one. Even though he was sad not to be able to use both, the man was glowing with pleasure, although Kevin's interruption kept him from literally bubbling.

"For free?" Kevin looked intently towards Gabriel, who just shrugged. Kevin then contemplated his options, and looking at Matthew, asked for another reduction in price. Gabriel and Tamara were looking at the exchange, Gabriel not quite understanding why his friend was arguing over a drawing he would have given for free. Tamara's eyes, though, were shining with pride at her boyfriend, and she elbowed Gabriel.

"I'll tell you later. Remind me."

After nodding in agreement, he noticed that they had finally settled for a price for both of their tattoos, and the last question was to be asked.

Matthew turned towards them. "Location?"

Having thought about it, they answered at the same time.

“Back.”

“Chest.”

Matthew and Kevin laughed, before trying again, this time asking more precision. Tamara wanted her phoenix on her right shoulder blade, and Gabriel had chosen his left pectoral, right over his heart. Both were a little self-conscious, and had chosen a place that they could hide easily with regular clothes.

After some minutes waiting, they finally had to sit facing each other and undress somewhat, both blushing. The tattoo artists, who had been introduced as Josh and Gary, had to check their skin quality and defects to select the appropriate inks and instruments, and they were now cleaning a rather large area with alcohol. Josh, who was working on Tamara’s back, suddenly exclaimed.

“Hey!”

Kevin had been reading a comic in a corner, but, hearing the exclamation, he rose and approached, while Tamara was looking at Josh’s perplexed face in the mirror.

“What?”

Josh was looking at Tamara’s back, and, more specifically, her neck. “I thought that you didn’t have a tattoo before?”

“I did not.” Tamara was starting to feel panicky. “What do you see?”

“Look” he said to Kevin, and pointing to a place on Tamara’s collar, right on her spine.

“What? I don’t see anything.”

“This!”

“That? It’s only a birth mark. You told me so, Tamara?”

She could only nod, while looking around in an agitated state. She obviously didn't want to cause problems, especially with Kevin's ties with the shop.

"Have you seen its shape?"

"What about it?"

"It's very small, and it's also very defined. It looks like a flame. See?"

"Yes, I know. It's my girlfriend, remember?" Kevin was sensing Tamara's agitation, and tried to soothe her by stroking her hand peacefully. "Besides," he continued, "I'm sure that everyone has some little marks like this. I have one on my leg; you could swear it's a sky map of Iceland. And I'm sure Gabriel has some, too."

"You're right-o, sonny."

Gary's voice, which they haven't heard previously, was deep, with a foreign accent. It made Kevin and Tamara jump. Gabriel couldn't jump, because the man's hands were holding him on his place, while he pointed to the others a place on his back, between some old scars. Right on his collar line. Right on his spine.

Tamara almost darted to Gabriel, but, as she was holding a cape to cover her front, and as she was also held by Kevin's hand, she couldn't voluntarily move brusquely, and she couldn't do more than narrow her eyes at Gabriel's back, trying to see the shape. After a couple of seconds, though, Gabriel shrugged the man off, and sat normally on the chair. After all, his tattoo was to be on his chest, so there was no need to examine his back.

During the whole process, which took a good two hours, Gabriel looked alternatively between his drawing and his chest, ignoring Tamara who was staring at him intently.

Hogwarts school, 10pm...

Minerva McGonagall was working, hauling the usual workload of the Headmistress. Serious about it, as she was serious about everything in life, and not taken by meetings with the Wizengamot as her predecessor had been, she could do much without the help of the Potion Master. Sure, he helped, but he also seemed to enjoy his free periods so much...

And she could manage. So she threw herself in the forms about registration of the previous Quidditch match's results, to be sent to the Ministry Department of Education, for an eventual review if some students wanted to be professional Quidditch players. Arthur had promised to send them someone to do that on the fly, during the match itself, but the Ministry bureaucracy was acting like the honey trapping the proverbial bee. Nobody had shown up, and she still had to fill the form. After that one, she had to sort the answers about students staying during Christmas holidays.

The urgent shrill coming from the silver instrument that never left her pocket since October brought her to her senses. Remembering the previous place, she ran out of her office as fast as her aged, if still fit, legs permitted. Once there, she banged on the door and called the room occupant.

“Sirius! Sirius Black! Is everything alright?”

Waiting for an answer, baiting her breath, she heard someone speaking two words behind the door, and soon afterwards a scuffle of feet could be heard coming and the door opened. She went inside and looked around wildly.

“Someone was here. I heard...”

She stopped, acknowledging two things. First, the voice that had spoken behind the door had been quite high, even if a little raspy. So, it could have been a student, or a young witch. She shuddered about the fact that someone could enter and exit the castle at will. The second thing she noticed was the extreme state of dirtiness of the room. As the intruder had visibly left, even if she had to speak to

Dumbledore about setting a possible trap, she had to address the second point immediately.

“Honestly, Sirius! How can you live in here like this? If you receive students in this environment, you can get expelled by the board of governors!”

Sirius Black, formidable wizard and grand seducer of women, was holding his hands behind his back and hanging his head shamefully. For him, since his second year of school when she had arrived in the school, McGonagall would always be the severe teacher, most opposed to the Marauders’ way of life. His stance didn’t calm her, though.

“I demand that you clean the place now, and that you stow your numerous bottles of...” she smelled around “...unidentifiable alcohol in a remote place. I’ll be back in an hour, and if the office is not spotless, I may put you back to sleep with your friend Remus.”

It had been fine to share Remus’ office and quarters, but the promiscuity had been wearing on them. Even close friends, they didn’t share the same views about the world, as Remus was more of the introverted type. Sirius sobered some more, and nodded, before starting to manually clean the place. The Headmistress sighed, thinking that a crash course of cleaning spells could be useful to the bachelor. She then left, heading to the office of the current Transfiguration teacher. He answered the door almost immediately.

“Ah. Minerva. I was on the process of making some tea, and I see that you could need some. Take a seat.”

“Thank you, Albus. I sometimes think that your reported abandonment of Divination was forged. You always seem to know what happens around.”

“Well, you see, when you’ll live many years as Headmistress, you’ll notice that walls don’t only have ears. They also have eyes to see, and mouths to tell. It seems that our little burglar showed himself again?”

“Yes.” She was slightly annoyed of not being the one bringing the news, but continued anyway. “Same place. I heard him behind the door; he spoke something that didn’t sound logical. As if...”

“...it was activation words for a portkey?”

“Yes. Besides, he disappeared at the same time, and Sirius didn’t notice anything. Well... in his state, he wouldn’t have noticed a dragon in front of him.”

“He celebrated his new room? Again?”

“Perhaps. Or he was just being himself. Even when he was a student, I never knew if he was serious or pulling a prank, especially about drinks.”

“Old habits die hard?”

“Look who’s speaking!”

“I know, I know. Speaking of which, would you like a lemon drop?”

“No, thanks, Albus. I prefer my tea unsweetened, as always.”

“Pity, that.” The old man commented, while adding a fourth spoonful of sugar in his steaming mug.

They stayed in comfortable silence for a short time, enjoying the tea and their mutual company, before she spoke again.

“We have to trap him. If it’s a ‘him’ anyway. You seemed to be pretty sure.”

“It’s a boy. But I wasn’t able to see his body, nor his face. I don’t know why, though. You see, after we talked about trapping the place after the first time and concluded on not doing it, I reflected about charming the place anyways. My Magical Remote Vision spell

triggered on the portkey arrival, and I saw a boy, but his body wasn't defined. As if..." He looked up, startled at his own recovery.

"Minerva, apart from Nymphadora Tonks, do you know any metamorphmagus nearby?"

"No. You think it's her?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm pretty sure it was a male, but I'd like to be sure about that. Metamorphmagi are quite rare, and if this boy is one, I'd like to recruit him."

"If he's not already sold to the other side."

"I think he's not. He was just there to explore. He didn't move, and looked at the place, as if... as if he didn't recognize it from before! Minerva! It was the same person, at the same place. Perhaps he's using a controlled portkey, and he'll always arrive in that room."

"We should have let it closed! I remember that, when we got there the first time, you had to use a very strong unlocking charm on the door. At least, he wouldn't have been able to escape..."

"Ah... dear Minerva. Do we always have the time to ponder our actions beforehand?"

"Albus, it's not fair. I know the correct answer is 'no.' Back to the subject at hand, what about young Nymphadora?"

"I think I'll bring her here, if she doesn't have something else planned. I'll try the spell on her, and see if it reacts the same way it did to the boy."

"What do we do about the office? Shall we close it?"

"I guess I have more to fear from Sirius in a surprised state than from the boy. He had been so calm while looking at the surroundings, it was almost as if he was on a reconnaissance mission."

“You see? It could be a mission for... for him.”

“Okay, okay. Even if I detected nothing evil in him, we’ll ask Sirius to go elsewhere and we’ll seal the door. I’ll expand Remus’ quarters some more, so that they wouldn’t run in each other all the time. It’s a pity, though. These quarters were quite proper, even if a little dusty.”

“Do you remember whose quarters they were?”

“Yes. I checked my Memoirs after you asked last time, and I found that an old witch named Ginevra Shaun taught here for a few years, before being killed in one of Voldemort’s early murdering sprees. At that time, I didn’t inquire much about the teachers’ background, so I don’t know if she had a family, ancestors or descendants.”

They stayed silent for a while, thinking about that teacher, whose office had been closed for such a long time. The stern Headmistress was the first to launch the discussion back in its tracks.

“What subject?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What subject did she teach?”

“Ah. Oh! Interesting question. You know, I had wondered why I had to put so much energy into my unlocking spell. The door lock had been tampered with, and not only by magic. She was teaching Technomancy, the art of mixing muggle technology with magic. With Grindewald’s program and then Voldemort’s, such a position was highly unstable. That’s why she hadn’t been replaced. Nowadays, from the little I can gather from our few muggleborns, such a subject would be awesome, if there was someone actually able to teach it. My own recollections of it date from so far away that I’d be hard-pressed to build a lesson plan on par with current muggle devices.”

“Albus, do you think that boy has a link with her?”

“Perhaps. After all, we didn’t discover much in the office. From the unequal dust cover and the tracks on it, I gathered that a large box, or a trunk, was removed, as well as the books from the bookcase. All other personal effects and the neatly piled old assignments had been left out.”

“Assignments?”

“Why, yes. It appears that our little visitor left them, so I stored them away. You want to grade them? It seems that the job wasn’t finished.”

“I’m not sure I can do that, but it could be interesting to read them.”

Albus Dumbledore stood and bent to search in a low cupboard near his desk, until he extracted a pile of parchment-like scrolls, and he held them to her. “Here they are.”

“Thanks.”

They stayed like that for some time, both drinking their tea while Minerva McGonagall was browsing the half-marked sheets with her off-hand. When her eyes fell on a particular one, she smiled, though, browsed through it entirely, and then gasped.

“What?” her old friend asked.

She didn’t answer, and held the page to him. There, on it, were written some words that would change Albus Dumbledore views on an otherwise non-descript teacher.

The page was starting by stating the subject and the student’s year: “Technomancy – first years.” It then continued with the student’s name: “James Potter.” That alone could explain McGonagall’s gasp, and he looked up to see that she was motioning him to continue reading. The short assignment continued by listing the possible uses of iron in spells. The thing that left him agape was the last line, separated from the rest. ‘I swear it, if you can’t give something better for an assignment, I’ll drop your subject, mum.’

Mum.

James Potter's mum.

Harry Potter grandmother.

And the boy... could it be possible that...? His mind was exploring so many thoughts that he couldn't speak for a while. Looking up to his Headmistress, he spoke slowly, as if dreading a reaction from the powers-that-be.

"We'll put another spell on the place, Minerva. I want to see that boy with my own eyes."

She nodded, and, thanking him for the tea, left towards Sirius' quarters, which would be soon vacated again.

Once alone, Albus Dumbledore took his head in his hands, and stayed like this for a long time, reflecting about his life, some teachers and some students, some dark lords and some heart-breaking decisions, and some wretched prophecies. A single tear could be seen running through his beard.

In a remote cottage, around the same time...

"Welcome back, Jugson. You know the procedure: as it appears that you didn't come back with the others, I'll perform some check on you, and you'd better not fail me."

"I'm yours to command, My Lord."

"Very well." And then, Voldemort unknowingly uttered the same words that Dumbledore had said while he was checking Ginny Weasley for possession. To Voldemort's knowledge, nothing could block that spell's detection powers, so, when no smoke cloud appeared on Alfred Jugson's head, he was satisfied to get his follower back. He dismissed him to the awaiting ranks of black-robed wizards.

“Dear followers,” he addressed to the twenty of them, “we cannot continue like before. Our numbers have been reduced, and we can't even actively seek new members. Our most influent recruiters have been exposed, and I don't have time to plant spies high enough in the Ministry to get information.”

Needless to say, the followers were stunned. Their all-powerful master was explaining the reasons why he wasn't all that powerful anymore. Some whispered comments could be heard in the room, which quieted immediately as soon as the Dark Lord spoke again, still through Barty Crouch's throat.

“I sense that some of you think lower of me now. Let's demonstrate that I didn't lose my power, only some weak followers! Crucio!” The few that had been commenting collapsed on the floor in cries of pain. Nobody went to help them. Nobody wanted a worse treatment.

“Now, now.” Voldemort spoke again, his anger relieved. “In the pain, we always learn something new. Be thankful for the experience.” He looked intently at the punished men, and they bowed their head, thanking him.

“Now, you can wonder why I told you all this? It's because we are going to change strategy. I called for the services of someone very proficient in her field, the Potion Mistress of Durmstrang, Miss Krenstarck.” A young woman, dressed wholly in dark green, approached Voldemort, bowed in front of him, and sat by his right.

“I also got the services of one of the most versed specialists in curses. His name had been given to me through our junior members despite otherwise... unfortunate circumstances.” he smirked, remembering Crabbe and Goyle's recollection of gaining that knowledge “I contacted our friends abroad to trap him and to bring him here. They arranged an accident on his work site, and abducted him. Some of you may know his family by name, but rest assured that I... managed to get his obedience quite fully. Isn't it, William?” On cue, a tall man entered the room, grunted while pushing his way through the few ranks of dark-robed wizards, and stood on the left of the Dark Lord, arms crossed. For those who knew the Minister's family, the

tell-tale red pony tail and earring were indication enough that the person standing in front of them, despite his tortured expression, wasn't anybody else than Bill Weasley.

Near Hogwarts, one week afterwards...

The Potion Ingredients Gathering outing was progressing rather well. A dozen students, attracted either by the learning experience, the unknown dangers lurking in these woods, or the extra credit awarded, had volunteered to follow Professor Glassend on a well-delimited trail through the Forbidden Forest. They had been warned that one step aside the trail would mean immediate danger, as not only the beasts living in the Forest were eager to eat some raw flesh, but some of the plants were hungry too. That thought had kept the student wary of staying on the pathway for the duration of the three-mile trek, until they had all arrived in a clearing. The night was calm, and they could only hear the sounds of night creatures moving around.

Now, the students were instructed on the care of collecting and preserving the plants, and especially the one they would be getting that night. The Wolfsbane herb, necessary for the potion named after it, only showed itself on a full moon night, and the light in the clearing was so much that no other light source was needed. Besides, magical light would have disturbed the gathering. They all had been instructed to start gathering the plant from the centre of the clearing, and to leave a wide ring of them around the clearing. That way, the Professor explained, the werewolves wouldn't go rampage on the clearing, which would destroy its usability.

All the students there were also known for their good grades in Herbology, as the care of plants was important when gathering them for Potions. Neville was there, beaming, as he had been nominated as teacher's assistant for the outing. The group included four students from Hufflepuff, three from Ravenclaw, eager to learn things about magical ingredients gathering and care. There were also two Gryffindors beside Neville, and two Slytherins.

In the previous years, Neville hadn't been widely accepted by the Slytherin students, especially those from his own year, and not only because of him being a Gryffindor. His limited interaction with the Potion Master, and his apparent lack of talent and self-confidence

had put that impression on him. Now, though, he was different. His parents were healthy now, and had contributed to buying him his own wand, more adapted to him, thus increasing his magical prowess. He was also feeling more at ease with himself and the others, having chosen his future already. Following his knowledge in Herbology, and his parents' recovery, he had decided to be a Healer. That, and the fact that Snape was teaching his year's Defence course, was why he was now assiduously following the Potion course.

All students were busy gathering the precious herb, and the other two Gryffindors complained about being bored. Hearing this, Neville had an interesting idea to lift their boredom, and challenged them in a contest, where the winner would be the one gathering the most of the herb. Neville didn't want to actively participate in the challenge, and he smiled when they accepted and they began to get the herb more rapidly. Unknown to him, and the teacher, they propagated the challenge to the Slytherin duo nearby, who propagated it to the others. Soon, the clearing was silent, except from the sound of herbs being carefully, even if quickly, removed from the earth. The Slytherin duo was starting to gain the upper hand in the challenge, when the teacher raised her head and asked everybody to stop, intently listening.

The clearing fell into silence.

A heavy, eerie, and foreboding silence.

When they had arrived there, they could hear the noise of creatures nearby, but now, the silence was complete. Turning around, Victoria Glassend inspected the surroundings, when she noticed the position of the students, especially the Slytherins.

"What are you doing?" she asked them urgently, even with her voice low.

"Errr... we gather the herb, Professor..."

"Why are you doing it over there?"

The students looked around themselves, and understood their error. Carried in the challenge, they had forgotten to leave a hefty ring of plants around the clearing. As they had been taught, they knew that it would slow the production of Wolfsbane for the following year, and promptly apologized for it.

“Sorry, Madam. We got carried by the job. Sorry about next year’s prod...”

“I don’t care about next year’s production! Do you know why I asked you to start from the centre outwards, and not the contrary?”

Neville had wondered that, and now, seeing her distraught Professor’s face, he started to understand. She made it clear for everyone, though.

“The ring is to offer protection should any werewolf come by while we work. Have you forgotten that the moon is full tonight? Thankfully, there is no werewolf activity around at the mo...”

She was interrupted by a growl, coming from behind the Slytherin students. They all turned towards the sound in slow motion, dreading what they would be seeing, and understanding the previous lack of sound around the clearing at the same time. There, between two trunks, and barely a yard away from the unfortunate students, a werewolf was standing, eyes glowing with hunger.

Students and teacher alike were standing still, terrified. Everybody knew that the beast was strong enough to pass the few plants, and when it leapt in the air, they still couldn’t move a finger, waiting for the ultimate punishment to fall. The targeted Slytherins closed their eyes in terror.

Darkness.

Scuffle. Gasps.

Pain-filled howls.

A growl.

But... no pain?

They opened their eyes, and saw what everyone was seeing. And they gasped like the others, as the sight was something that, even in their wildest nightmares, they couldn't envision so near to them.  
Flashback...

"What do you want?"

"I know about your... special talent."

She was shocked, as he was looking at her with the most penetrating gaze he ever had in the previous months. Still, even if she had a faint idea of the talent he spoke about, she didn't know what he wanted to talk about.

"So what?"

"I know. And as you are the only one to be able to do that, I'm asking you a favour."

"I do still not understand."

"You are going to follow the group in the forest tonight. They are walking towards their death."

She shuddered. Not only was he clear and to the point, but he also pointed to the target clearly. But she knew his abilities now, and wasn't afraid.

"You're sure that I alone can do that?"

"Yes. Don't worry, and use your ability, and everything will be fine."  
Back to the present...

In front of the shocked eyes of the group of twelve students and their teacher, a wolf was howling in pain, lying in the few remaining ranks of Wolfsbane, and kept on his back by a massive paw. Paw which belonged to a massive feline. A feline which was looking at them with almost impossibly intelligent brown eyes, before its head seemed to vibrate. Then, in a strange fashion, human-like sounds came from the beast's deformed throat.

"Leave. Take plants."

It took them half a second to process the growled request, before registering that the werewolf was starting to fight the lion back. They scurried away, clutching their pouches of rare herbs, followed by animal fighting sounds, and they didn't stop running before reaching Hogwarts massive doors, which were open.

Open? At night? With a werewolf on the loose?

Two students were holding the doors open, and started to close them after they all got in. They paused halfway, though, and waited for someone else to pass through the doors before clanking them shut. The newly arrived female student slumped against the closed doors, dishevelled, panting, and her clothes in disarray and even torn in some places. After making sure that she was okay, the door holders turned to address the previously plant-gathering group.

"So, was the evening interesting enough?"

Ron and Luna were smiling, as was Ginny, while she recovered from the fighting and the sprint.  
Somewhere else...

After the tattooing session, once they were back outside, Kevin confessed that he and Matthew liked to haggle good-naturedly about things. While he was talking, though, Tamara stared at Gabriel. The three of them separated at their usual point, continuing their walk home. However, a few minutes afterwards, when Gabriel was pushing Grace's house door open, a running and panting Tamara

pounced on him, sending him sprawling on the floor. Entering, and closing the door, she yelled at him.

“YOU KNEW!”

She was fuming. Gabriel looked at her from his lying position, then at the clock. Seeing that Grace wouldn't be home for a time, he hoisted himself up, and answered.

“What do you mean?”

“The mark on your neck! I can't believe you knew and you made me look like a fool!”

“What about it?”

“Show it to me first, questions later. I want to know your sphere.”

“But...”

“No buts!”

Her eyes were literally glowing, and her short-fused temper was starting to show. Quite afraid of the unexplainable glow, and not knowing the reason behind her outburst, he readily complied, turning around and lowering his shirt collar.

She inspected the spot, and calmed instantly, gasping. At the sound, he turned around again, and found her gaping.

“What?”

“Turn around; I want to see it again. I may not have seen it properly. Please.”

He complied again, even if it was a polite request this time. She spent the next minute examining his mark, to the muffled exclamations of “It's not possible!” and “What group is this?”

Finally, fed up with her annoying push-around, he turned again, and demanded an explanation. She was subdued, now, and started to apologize meekly.

“Gabe, I’m sorry to have pushed you like that, really. You are sure that you don’t know anything about this mark and its significance?”

“I told you already, I haven’t even remarked it!”

“Sorry, but I can’t explain right now. I have to contact people and get some information first.”

“I want to know why you pounced on my right there and demanded to explore my neck, so don’t invent excuses!”

“Honestly, I have to go the Library, to do some research.”

“Stop it already, you sound like Her...” he stopped suddenly, grasping his head in pain.

Tamara put a hand on his shoulder. “Who, Gabriel? Joan?”

A long silence, and a sigh, then “No... Someone else.”

“The girl you drew, perhaps?”

“No, no. I don’t know why, and I don’t remember anything else, but it’s just ‘Her’-something.”

They stayed in the hallway of the house for half a minute, still standing. Then, Tamara excused herself, and left. It took some more time to Gabriel to gather himself again, before grasping a lump of bread from the kitchen and climbing the stairs to his room.

Two days later...

“I’m sorry.”

Remus raised his head from his hands. He had been crying for a long time. Of course, he had suspected that something was wrong the

moment he had woken up in the forest, his backside on fire and his limbs wary. It had taken him half the day to come back to Hogwarts and once there, he could only take the secret passage to the abandoned and supposedly-haunted house in Hogsmeade. Once there, he had painfully erected the protections he remembered from his youth, and spent the last full moon night banging his head and pained arms on the walls, while howling and thus re-establishing a forgotten legend about the house.

What surprised him, though, is that he had wanted to say that first. He had no memory of what had happened, as always in this case, and could only suspect that someone had been injured because of him. The fact that the person telling him that was Snape, was augmenting his surprise.

“What do you mean? No, wait. First, as I never remember anything in that state, I want to know who I attacked.”

A silence, then “No one.”

A longer silence.

“I don’t believe you.”

“And you would have all rights not to.” Snape sighed, before continuing. “But you didn’t attack anyone. Well... it seems that you tried, but were prevented.”

“Tell me.”

“There was an Ingredient Gathering outing, and they saw a werewolf.”

“Oh my god... but you said...”

“Let me finish. They also saw a large lion barging in, knocking the wolf down on a bed of Wolfsbane.”

Remus tentatively touched his back, and the pain was still there. Straightening up, he nodded for the other to continue.

“The lion told them to leave, and they returned safely to Hogwarts, welcomed by three students.”

“What do you mean, ‘told them to leave’? And which students?”

“I meant what you heard. As I didn’t believe them, Longbottom proposed that he showed the memory in a pensieve. I gather his interaction with his parents is progressing quite well for him to speak up like that. And that was true, the lion spoke indeed. Well it growled understandable English, at least. As for your other question, the students were the two youngest from the red haired family you know about, and the Lovegood girl from Ravenclaw.”

Each of the Potion Master’s words was like a new enigma to Remus Lupin. The Longbottoms’ recovery hadn’t been in the Daily Prophet’s front page, and even if it had been, he had seldom read it before, and hadn’t changed his attitude after the change in Minister, even if the paper was better now. Snape proceeded in telling him that event, and, without gloating about it, the part that he had played in it, thus surprising him even more. Remus was dumbfounded.

“I guess... thanks are in order, for this information, and also for all your recent good deeds. Who would have known...”

“Don’t start rambling.” the Potion Master’s tone was harsh, despite the smile that curved the sides of his mouth.

They sat in silence for a while, reflecting about their youth and the different paths they had had to walk. Then, remembering Snape’s first words, Remus looked at him inquiringly.

“What did you mean earlier, about being sorry? I drank your Wolfsbane potion, everything should have been fine.”

“I had been preoccupied by another problem, and, despite having made the potion properly, I didn’t take the time to bring it to you. I

didn't think about calling you in my offices either, so I caught the first student to hover nearby to bring the potion to you. My office being situated in the dungeons, it was a Slytherin, but I should have taken her name into consideration."

"Why? She was very friendly when she gave the bottle to me."

"Of course she would. Being a Slytherin, she would know how to mask her features. I'm quite sure that the draught has been tampered with. Besides, knowing some interesting facts by some... source, I'm sure she did it on purpose, knowing about the Ingredients Gathering outing."

"What can we do?"

"We can't prove anything. We just had luck that nobody was attacked..."

"...and bitten."

"True. The least I can do, though, is to put her on a very short leash. On the next problem, I'll make sure to personally expel her."

A long pause, again.

"Severus... can I call you Severus? We've known each other as colleagues for a long time, now."

A surprised look was exchanged between the two, before the Potion Master agreed, with a smirk.

"Only if I get to call you Remus. But don't think that we'll hug like long-lost friends."

"Never been my intention."

Snape nodded, acknowledging the humour behind, and Remus continued.

“What about the lion?”

“What lion? Oh! The lion... Well... if I had money to bet, I’d place it on Albus knowing something. His eyes were twinkling at record levels when we were witnessing the scene in the pensieve. He didn’t say anything, though, even when I asked him in private afterwards. I’d also bet that Minerva remarked him hiding something, as she looked at him inquiringly for an instant. I can only imagine what the two of them must tell to each other when they meet.”

To be continued in next chapter: No Santa This Year...

The beast showed his head again.  
The lost got marked with a gain.  
Next part is almost ready,  
Review, keep my muse steady.

## Chapter 19 – No Santa This Year

The last day before Christmas holidays, on the evening, Grace, Gabriel, Joan and Michael all piled up in Michael's old car, and went back to the funfair, to open their stall again. Grace and Gabriel were silent, having had a heated discussion at home about his "active participation" in the ride. He wanted to play the monster again, and she didn't, afraid that he might be hurt again. After remarking that she had let him do that during almost the entire summer, he had won the case, but she was a little worried anyway, and was brooding over it. Gabriel was silent too, but it was more because he was thinking about everything that had happened to him since Halloween.

Gabriel reflected about working in the ghost ride again. Thanks to the ring, Gabriel now knew how to get out of a tricky situation, so he wasn't as afraid as one could be. After the Halloween dreams and the subsequent morning's furry problem, he had been in the isolated rooms some more times. He was starting to feel at home there, and had translated most of Ginevra Shaun's diary. He had also started to call her 'Professor' in his mind, because of the fact that she had actually been teaching for a job at one point. And it wasn't an easy course, as he had seen some of the incomprehensible books while stacking them in the shelves, and he remembered the rather poorly-graded stack of assignments he had seen when he had been fetching those books.

He was also starting to mentally refer to the "safe haven" as his hideaway, especially since he translated the part of the diary relative to its internal comfort and organization. For instance, he now knew how to change its appearance and colour theme just by uttering a few chosen words. He had also discovered how to enlarge or reduce the room he was now referring to as the "sport room." At least, he would be able to run laps without being forced to go outside.

There were some difficult parts in the diary, that, even translated in proper English, didn't make any sense to him anyway. Some other parts were intimately linked to the encrypted book about Transportation Devices, thus he had to translate both books at the same time to try to understand more of them. The current result was that he now knew that his ring's way of transporting could be

customized. He hadn't finished that part, though, as it was easily the largest, needing the translation of four different chapters.

One other property that he had remarked before, without taking it into consideration, was the Hideaway's properties regarding time. He hadn't thought about his first full day in it, when he had been sure to be missing a day of class, and had woken up on a regular Monday morning. Reading the diary, he discovered that the time spent in the three rooms was equivalent to one fourth of that time outside. For each hour he had spent in the rooms, only fifteen minutes had run outside. That's how he could cope with all the school work, the activities with his friends, and his own research too. If he went to his Hideaway and slept the whole 'night' there, he could spend a day and another night inside, while outside, only the night had passed. It also helped him that Grace was a heavy sleeper, and had never checked on him during his escapades.

### Escapades.

He had read more about his ring, and discovered a set of other locations that Ginevra Shaun had obviously judged interesting. On a whim, he had decided to explore them, although he hadn't spent more than a few seconds in each, just looking around to get an idea of the place. These destinations were generally shadowy alcoves, so that the arrival of the person wearing the ring wouldn't be too obvious. So far, he had visited an empty train station platform; a dark alleyway with shoddy shops and an equally trashy pub; the outside of a beautiful house surrounded with woods; and the dusty office again. He hadn't known why, but he had been feeling attracted to it.

When he had arrived there, though, he had been surprised to find it thoroughly dusted, and obviously used by someone. Still a teacher, visibly, judging by the little stack of assignments on the desk, but a bachelor male one, judging by the unclean state of the room and the miscellaneous bottles decorating the top of furniture and the floor. During his observation, he had been suddenly startled to hear someone banging at the door and calling a name, and someone else's waking sounds coming from the couch facing the fire, away from him.

There had been someone in the room! He had been lucky that the couch had been facing the other way, and that the person hadn't been up and about at that moment. He had had just the time to utter the words to get back to his Hideaway before being discovered. Once there, he had sighed, mentally crossing that destination out of the list, and had continued translating the books. He had also started to exercise with the weights, and had found that, even with his small frame, he could lift quite a heavy load. He had also exercised his endurance by running laps with the weight bar on his shoulders.

At one point, he had been holding the heavy bar by one end, and had noticed that something was written right on the end. It hadn't been the 'say weight' thing like on the other end, only 'think arm'. He had reflected about it for some time. Which arm, right or left? Thinking about it a bit more, he had tried something else. Arm could mean weapon, and if the staff could alter its own weight, why couldn't he transform into a weapon?

His heart beating, as if hoping for some miracle to occur, he had spoken. "Sword."

Nothing had happened, and he had sighed, before remembering the beautiful sword he had drawn before, a sword that he could have had pleasure to handle. He had been holding the staff, dreaming about the sword, when he had noticed something strange: the staff had been vibrating against his hands. After a few seconds, its shape had changed and it had taken every physical aspect of the envisioned sword, except that it had been wholly metallic, and the notices written on it had disappeared. In surprise, Gabriel had released his grasp on it, and it had fallen on the floor with a clank. Remembering the wording of these writings, he had almost slapped himself on the forehead. Of course! It was 'think arm,' not 'speak arm'!

He had bent to take it again, and noticed its weight. "Two ounces," he had then said, and the sword had become much more manageable. His mind had been starting to get wild ideas then, and he had imagined a two-inch long screwdriver. The sword had vibrated again, before becoming the desired tool. Now, he had reflected, he could even take it out of the Hideaway if he wanted. He hadn't wanted it to be lost or stolen, though. Afterwards, he had thought about the

original bar, and started to lift weights again.

At one point later, he had also read and understood how to add and remove a location on the ring, and he had immediately added the inside of an empty closet in his room at Grace's. He would also add one or two hidden spots inside the ghost ride itself, as soon as he would be able to access it, as well as one in Grace's trailer.

At the funfair...

The first days of re-opening were fun. People started to come back in numbers, and Gabriel's job was bringing them more and more customers. Michael's stand, with the help of a vivacious Joan, was successful as well, even if the customers missed more than they hit the target, distracted as they were by Joan's lithe frame. After all, most clients of a sharp shooting stall were male, and some of the younger and less retrained ones were openly gawking at her. The four of them could often be seen walking together between the trailers and the fair, in the morning and evenings.

Unbeknownst to them, Joan's show wasn't attracting the regular customer's eyes only. A group of troublemakers was back, with a vengeance.

John Jeremiah Jenkins, called and known as 'Johnny' by his few friends, has initially been recruited in his university because of his promises for the local sports team, and not for his wits. Once there, he had naturally found friends indulging, like him, in terrorizing the population. If his grades had been high enough, he wouldn't have been stopped in this, despite the student associations' complaints. However, on their errands, they met a group of purveyors of 'special' goods, and they all hooked up on drugs. The result hadn't been long, and the first medical examination results made sure that he and three of his friends would be expelled, the other two barely escaping the punishment through better-than-average grades and written promises to do better from then on. Johnny should have known not to make a fool of himself, though, because these examinations came fairly often for the athletes.

Since then, the four of them had been aimlessly roaming the streets, sometimes being detained by the cops, sometimes escaping them. Attracted by the noise and activity of the renewed fair, they had regrouped there, and searched for an opportunity in troublemaking. When he saw Joan, then, Johnny immediately wanted her. The others in the group would support him, as he was the leader, and they observed her and her schedule. While doing so, they remarked two things. The first was Gabriel, and his shared closeness to Joan, which infuriated them greatly. Still, they didn't act on impulse like in the summer, because of their new street-oriented wisdom. Attacking in the open would grant them a long stay in the local prison, something they had not grown fond of.

The second thing they remarked was that she went back to the trailers everyday at midday, to prepare sandwiches for her, her dad, Grace and Gabriel. After three days of stalking, they put their plan into action.

“Good day, beauty.”

Joan turned around, surprised. Nobody except stall keepers generally went near the trailers, because the passages there were few and well-hidden between stalls. The approaching man seemed to smile at her, but his general demeanour meant something she didn't want to know, and she started to back away, to find her steps blocked by another man, this one short with Asian features. Two other thugs emerged from her left and right. Feeling cornered, she started to yell, before sensing a sharp object pointing at her neck. Each of them had a long, dirty, and wicked-looking knife!

“I won't say no sound if I was you.” The message, even incorrectly formulated, was clear to her. The knife intensified its meaning by scraping on her skin, drawing some blood.

His eyes then glowed with unholy glee, and the knife started to move down, first tugging, then tearing the outer layers of clothing she had on. She could only watch, terrified, as her worst nightmares came to life. Her whimpers and pleas for mercy seemed only to intensify the ruffians' happiness. Desperate, she started to buck and almost

escaped them, before two of the men jumped on her, and maintained her on the muddy ground. The leader took his skull-decorated black scarf off, and tied it around her mouth, preventing more shouts.

He then finished his job of tearing her clothes, and got quite a shock, as the white freckled skin and immature body showed her age. Her vivacity, which had made her so desirable, was gone as she sobbed pitifully. However, here was an almost-naked girl, and he wasn't to let the opportunity pass. Aroused by his comrades' raunchy comments and by her mounting denial, he quickly prepared himself, and in a swift move, burst the girl's innocence.

Grace was hungry. But, at 11:30, it was somewhat normal when you woke at 5 to work. But, after all the coffee ingested in the morning, she also had an urgent need to go to the bathroom. Calling Gabriel to manage the ticket selling, she left for the nearest loo, which was behind the stalls, on the way to the trailers.

On her way, she spotted a group of men uttering crude comments, and approached them warily. They sounded like nobody she knew, and she knew all the locals. When she noticed what they were doing, and the prone red-head on the ground, she couldn't refrain a yell, before running towards them, intent on stopping them.

However, as she had approached them silently, her yell and run-in surprised them all, and the one who had his back to her turned rapidly. She finished her course close to him, gaping in surprise. When he had turned around, the Asian guy still had his knife in hand, ready to scare the intruder. He hadn't counted on the intruder impaling herself on it, and was as surprised as she was. He could only gape as the old woman slowly slid to the ground, his still-held bloody knife slowly extracting itself from her in the process.

Now, the group of men had always done bad things in the past, even drawn blood and incapacitated people, but none had killed before, and it suddenly frightened them. In panic, not able to think coherently, they ran out as fast as they could.

Gabriel was still selling tickets at the ghost ride, and was starting to feel hungry. It had been some time now, and Grace should have

been there already. As it was midday, fewer people were doing the ride, so he decided to close after them, to search for the old lady.

At first, he didn't notice anything out of the usual on his way to the homes. But a whimper made him turn back and explore the remote recesses in the path. He wasn't prepared for the sight that assaulted his vision, and his stomach heaved heavily, trying to expulse the food he didn't have. He quickly went to the prone bodies, quickly discovering that the mud was crimson around Grace. Turning her over, he noticed her rigidity, pallor, and wound. He could only cry to his loss, while turning to Joan.

Joan was curled in a ball, whimpering and shaking badly. He initially thought that she witnessed Grace's murder, but, when she drew away of him in fright, her eyes wide and absent, and her clothes completely torn and in disarray, he started to understand the full extent of what she'd been through. His heart bled in compassion towards his friend, and he could only try to calm her in a sobbing voice. When she suddenly acknowledged his presence, she launched to him, and they both cried. After a few minutes, exhausted, she went to sleep in his arms, and he proceeded to carry her to her home.

Shaking, he removed her outer and uncomfortable clothing and shoes, and gently deposited her on her bed, covering her with her drapes. She looked so innocent then, that he cried again. He didn't want to leave her at all, but something had to be done, and he had to find Michael quickly. For her not to feel alone in case she woke, he wrote a short message on a sheet of paper, saying that he was going back shortly, which he deposited on her nightstand. He then went back to the fair, passing at the same point to look at Grace alone for the last time. That's when he noticed something that had escaped his previous visit.

A black scarf, with white skulls on it.

He blinked once. Twice. He knew that scarf! Of all the people he had met, even from all the ride's clients, only one person had been wearing such a thing. His anger was mounting while he reflected about people who would go so low as to attack defenceless kids and

old ladies. When he couldn't hold his fury anymore, he closed his teary eye and, raising his head to the sky and spreading his arms to his sides, let it all flow.

The sound was deafening in his ear. It was as if a thousand lions were roaring in his ears, while a thunderstorm was raging nearby at the same time. Behind his closed eyelid, he even saw flashes of light going on.

The sudden calm around him made him conscious about his surroundings again. The usual noise from the fair was quieted down as everyone was asking where that sound came from. Gabriel felt suddenly very dizzy, and he remarked that his tears didn't feel the same. Unconsciously, he licked them.

Licked them?

How could his tongue reach so far on his cheeks?

He touched his face, and almost passed out at the discovery. He was suddenly afraid that people would come, and searching for a way out, he had only one place in mind.

“Safehaven.”

Michael had been worried for a time, but had dismissed Joan's absence. He had thought that, with her feelings towards Gabriel, she would stay at the ghost ride for a while, but that was some time ago, and he was feeling really hungry now. Unknowingly having the same reasoning as Gabriel about the lack of customers, he proceeded to close his stall. That's when he had heard the roar nearby. Everybody in the vicinity had been frightened at the sound, but, not noticing anything else, they all seemed to think that it was one of the fair's random events. Only the stall keepers continued to look wary, as they knew that wasn't true. Michael, having closed his stall, went towards Grace's ride to have a chat with her, Gabriel, and his daughter.

When he noticed the small wooden paned indicating 'Closed', he turned back and headed towards the homes. On his way, though, he

jumped in surprise when Gabriel suddenly appeared right in front of him, apparently from thin air.

“Damn,” he thought “what is happening to me?”

After having arrived in his hideaway, Gabriel looked around, and his bedroom seemed more... alive... than before. As if it had acquired a depth that he couldn't perceive before. Angrily throwing the scarf in a corner, Gabriel absently reflected about his vision while heading in the bathroom where the mirrors were. When he saw his face, he shouted in surprise.

Only, it wasn't a shout that emerged from his deformed mouth, only an animalistic yelp.

He had the head of a lion.

The moment of surprise went away, and he approached to check his face some more. It wasn't a mask, as the skin was his. It wasn't paint or false hair. In fact, it remained him of his previous 'furry' problem. He closed his eyes to reflect about it, trying to remember how to become normal again, when he noticed something really bizarre. He opened his eyes, and the answer jumped to him.

His EYES.

The lion's face had two working eyes! That's why his rooms had seemed more alive than before!

His perception of the universe was starting to tilt, and he reflected that he should take some time, someday, to explore exactly what he was, and what he could do.

Someday. But not today, he remembered with sorrow. He had to fetch Michael to take care of Joan. That is, if he could get his own face back.

He remembered the meditation exercises, the focus he needed, and he closed his eyes, recalling his own scarred face. Scarred? He felt a tingle on his face, and opened his eye to recognize his scarred face. He would have to explore the scars and eyes later.

He then used his ring to come back, but, not thinking clearly, he didn't go for the inside of the ride, where people wouldn't have remarked him. He just got back from where he came, right in front of Michael's surprised face.

He gasped at the face that had appeared.

"How is this possible?"

In his orange-decorated bedroom, Ron didn't look up from the crystal ball, where Harry's face was floating. The others, who had asked the question, bent towards the ball, taking his head in. The head turned around, and they noticed the left side of his face, with all the scars and the closed eye.

The ball suddenly cleared, and everyone started to ask questions, quickly stopped by Luna. She had her hands on Ron's shoulders, and he was still concentrating on the crystal ball.

"The path back is opened." Ron uttered suddenly. The small room gradually felt some wind, and the sound of wings flapping. Then he sighed, released the ball, and everything fell back to normal. He looked around, taking in the faces of his friends.

He shrugged, saying "I can't go beyond blood protections. I'm tired now."

He made two steps and collapsed on his bed, while Luna put the ball in its box and stored it in his trunk. They then left the orange room.

On their way down, Luna whistled a happy tune, while the others discussed animatedly.

"You noticed? Visual and Audible elements. And Tactile ones too!"

"No wonder he got these marks in Divination."

“It’s not like he was here! After all, it could just be his invention, like he did in Divination before.”

Hermione Granger had the knack to put people in place recently. Even if she had witnessed the feat like the others, her mind couldn’t wrap around it, so she had dismissed it. The only sensible thing she did was not to say it right in Ron’s face. After his summer reaction to her, she didn’t want to be chased away.

Luna Lovegood and her father had been invited at the Burrow for the whole day, thanks to Ginny. She had noticed that Ron had started to like Luna very much, even if none of them ever showed the usual signs of teenagers in love. After all, they were quite different from the regular students, now. After receiving the answer to her request for information from Luna’s dad, she understood them a bit more. At least, more than most. She had had to intervene again, and more than once, to stop some students to overtly mocking them.

She had also pushed her mother to invite Hermione and her parents, now that the older girl was calmer.

The meal had been a success, despite Bill’s absence. His last message had said that he was going in a long-term mission, and he didn’t answer his mail anymore. It wasn’t the first Christmas without him because of these secret missions, though, and the Weasleys had merely written a message to Gringotts in Cairo, Bill’s employer, before letting the matter drop for a while.

After dessert, the kids had persuaded Ron to use a crystal ball to remember Harry, but he had only found his scarred face, which had raised many questions from them. Ginny was thoughtful, though. If what Dumbledore had hinted was true, Harry might be alive. But, even with his scars, how comes he wasn’t reachable with owls and didn’t try to contact them?

Reflecting, she didn’t immediately notice that Hermione had stopped with her on her bedroom’s threshold, letting the twins and Luna descend the rest of the stairs.

“I have something to ask you.”

“Hermione, it’s not in your nature to fret. Just ask.”

The older girl suddenly seemed unsure of herself.

“Come on, Hermione, show me our Gryffindor bravery, and ask.”

Hermione’s head shot up and she looked at Ginny inquiringly for a few seconds, before dropping again.

“We’d better go in. I don’t want people to overhear this.”

Curious now, Ginny opened the door and held it. Once inside, they sat face to face, and Hermione began to recount her project of re-Sorting herself, to Ginny’s wide eyes.

“...and, as I have to find one student from each House to vouch for me, I thought about you.”

The young teen was gaping at her friend. Her friend, who wanted to leave their House.

“Why?”

“Because, if you haven’t noticed, I don’t have any affinities with Gryffindor in general, or Gryffindor students. I’m not that brave anyway, and I’m certainly not reckless like most of the Gryffindors are. I enjoy studying, something almost no other Gryffindor likes, and I only feel at home in the Library. I’m a Ravenclaw at heart, and you know that. You are the only Gryffindor that I can call my friend nowadays, especially since...” she shuddered, interrupting her tirade while they both thought about Harry.

“I’ll be sad to have you leave us, Hermione. But I can see you’re unhappy. I’ll do that.”

They hugged, in tears, and Hermione answered. “I’m sorry, really. I’ll try not to answer too much in class afterwards.”

“Beware; with such comments on loyalty, you might be re-Sorted in Hufflepuff!”

They both smiled at the jokes, and after a short moment of cleaning the traces of tears, went down to join the others.  
In a small room...

The only two doors opened at the same time, and an old man entered from one side, while a young person, dressed in black, entered from the others. In the middle of the room, a square of bicoloured marble was floating four feet from the floor. On the square, evenly split into 64 cells, a chess game was playing, and it seemed that the pieces were moving even as the persons there didn't touch them.

“I wonder if that was a good idea from the start.” the young one started.

“Thou seemed to be quite inclined to the idea.” the man retorted, his deep voice resounding in the small room.

“We waited too long for it to start, and I didn't think you'd give them such liberties! Anyway, you seem to be losing, now.”

“I am certainly not losing ere; thou are going senile in thine old age, notwithstanding that appearance thou seem to cherish.”

“Shut up, old fool! I took two pawns in one move, and you didn't react.”

“Shall thou examine the play carefully, thou would observe that a little gambit of mine was successful.”

The young one looked at the board intently, before cursing heavily.  
“You cheated! Damn you!”

“Now, now, now. Thou know that even thyself can't do that, and we are not allowed to cheat.”

“Still...”

“Thou would best calm down, and bear in mind what we determined to be at stake, this time.”

That seemed to calm the restless one, and both became silent again, observing the board for some time, before leaving the room silently, using the door they went in through.  
Back in the park...

“What are you doing?”

“Come.” He said, sadness filling his eyes.

Tugging at Michael’s sleeve, Gabriel directed him towards the place where Grace’s body was still resting against the ground. Michael cried, and kneeled beside her, trying to wake her.

“Grace! Grace!”

“It’s too late, Michael.”

“How do you know?” He retorted, turning brusquely.

“She’s dead.”

At the sentence, they both cried near her body. Looking around, Michael finally sensed that someone was missing.

“Joan? What happened to Joan?”

“Michael, I’m sorry...”

The man interrupted him “What do you mean you’re sorry? Where is she?”

“She’s alive, and... and you’d better sit before I lose my nerves.”

Sensing the teen's turmoil of emotions, Michael silently sat on the nearby bench.

"Grace wanted to leave for a while, and left me with the shop. When she didn't come back, I closed it and found her in this state, and Joan was... Oh my god, I can't even say that."

Michael, while impatient to find his daughter, nudged Gabriel gently. The young teen looked the man in the eye, and spoke again, even if haltingly.

"From the way things were... I think Grace interrupted something... something... Joan's clothes... they were torn... and she was... she's..."

"NO!" Michael finally understood what had happened, and he jumped on his feet. "Where is the bastard?"

"I didn't see them, but I'll find them, and I'll make them pay."

Something in the wording of the sentence, and the intent behind it, called to Michael. But he dismissed it, as he wanted to see his daughter now that he knew what had happened.

"Where is she?"

"In her bed. Sleeping."

"Okay. You stay here, and I'll call the police."

Gabriel nodded, and turned back towards the place where the hideous act had unfolded.

"Gabriel?" Michael called softly.

He turned his head.

"Thank you. For everything."

Gabriel turned his head back towards Grace, nodding in the process. He wasn't even sure to be able to speak again without sobbing. Anger could wait, now. While Michael went to check on his daughter and to phone the police, in that order, Gabriel could only wait. While doing so, though, he noticed that the bushes nearby, although always leafless on winter, were burnt as if a flash fire had passed. Curious about that, he looked around, and saw that all the nearby shrubbery was in that state. Even the stones in the pathway were charred. He was just wondering about it when Michael came back with a young police officer.

They spent the afternoon with Joan, in the customary questioning from the local authorities, but she couldn't answer any question, curling into a protective ball whenever the police officers approached the topic. Understanding her reaction, Michael removed her from them, and they went back home.

That night, Gabriel went to bed in the empty household, but couldn't find sleep. Deciding that he could spend some time working out, he went to his hideaway, and spent a few hours training furiously with the heavy staff, before passing out from exhaustion.

When he woke up, he had to spend a few minutes remembering the situation, and how he had ended sleeping in sweat-crusted clothes in the hideaway's sports room, near a staff which seemed heavy like an anvil. When the events of the previous day came back to his memory, he stood up suddenly, and glanced at his watch. It showed 8am, and he had left for the Hideaway around 9pm the previous night, before training for a few hours. He calculated that the time outside was around 1am, and, after changing back into his pyjama, he went back to check on things. Nothing had happened, and he just slumped on his bed, thinking about Grace and how she had welcomed him, without asking questions. He didn't know why, but he felt that she had been the kindest person he had even known. Ever.

The following days were hectic, as he had to cope with Grace's death, Joan's distressed and confused state, and Michael's sad looks. As Joan also had Michael to help her, Gabriel sometimes spent time in the fair, glancing at the now-closed ghost ride and wondering. What would he do now? Should he search for another job? He didn't know

if the ride had been Grace's at all. He didn't even know how things went when people died.

Some days afterwards, the officials managing the fair told him that the ride hadn't been Grace's, and that she was managing it for one of them. It was an old ride, they said, and it didn't attract many visitors, despite the slight raise in the previous summer. They wanted to switch it for a more modern one, and proposed him the full-job of managing it. He reflected about it, and, despite the grieving about losing Grace and her stall at the same time, he accepted. However, they would have to dismount it first, and construct the other. The job wouldn't start before the following summer. He also had to move out of Grace's trailer because, like the ride, it was lent by them to fair employees with some years of work behind them. He was feeling as if everything was falling apart. He still had Joan to help, though, and Michael offered him a permanent stay. He could also stay with them after the holidays.

The park officials had contacted Grace's last remaining family, a short-sighted sister and her husband, who Grace had never mentioned, even when Gabriel had asked about her family. Even if Gabriel had been there at that time, they didn't even acknowledge him. They looked at an inventory of sorts, signed it, and delivery men took everything. Thankfully, Gabriel had already moved his few belongings into his Hideaway, even the ones from Grace's suburb house, where he had spent a short time thanks to his ring. He had also transferred some personal things that Grace had used. Her own hand-written cookbook. A painting that they both had liked. The most recent photographs, showing him, her, and others like Joan and Michael. Out of his secluded rooms, he only kept a backpack of clothes and emergency stuff to live with Michael and Joan. If he hadn't kept anything, the man would have noticed and he would have asked uncomfortable questions.

Even Grace's funeral was expedited by the infamous sister, despite the crowd of stall keepers and other fair employees who had known her for years, some of them even all their life. At the end of the ceremony, Gabriel stayed with Joan and Michael at the grave. Joan being unwell, they silently left after both hugging him, and he found himself alone. The rain that soon started to fall, and the approaching

evening didn't push him away. And when nearby churches called for Christmas' eve mass, he didn't move, his tears mingling with the rain. There wouldn't be a Christmas feast for him.

To be continued in next chapter: Wild Side...

I'm sorry, had to write this,  
To keep the plot not amiss.  
My muse has her up and down.  
Please review, don't let me down.

## Chapter 20 – Wild Side

After a few days of grieving, Michael had to continue operating his stall, at least to keep his mind working properly. His daughter's state wasn't improving, but Gabriel stayed with her all the time, so he wasn't as worried leaving them as he would have if she had been alone.

The teenagers spent the days walking around town, hand in hand, seldom saying anything, but finding refuge in each other's presence. During the nights, Joan was often plagued by nightmares, and several times, Gabriel found himself in her bedroom, kneeling near her, holding her hand and stroking her sweating face to calm her. At one time, he felt that she was holding to his hand as if it was a lifeline, and he resolved never to leave her alone until she healed. If she could be healed at all. The day following that night, he and Michael installed the couch in her bedroom, and he slept there.

She was still having nightmares, even if they were fewer and farther between, and he was regularly awakened by her whimpers and cries, and then stayed up for a good part of the night. When he was holding her hand, he had time to reflect about things.

During one of these thinking sessions, holding her hand, he thought about his Hideaway. Would it be possible to bring another person with him?

He sometimes thought about the thugs who did that to her. Each time, he found himself wishing them an agonizing death, but he quickly calmed himself, because Joan's agitation would start again when he thought about them.

Most of the other thoughts were about his strange transformations. He couldn't explain them, but it felt good each time. One time, being up around midnight, he tried to do it right there. His right hand being quite taken, he raised his left arm, and imagined it as a lion's paw.

Nothing happened.

He shrugged it off. Of course, nothing would happen! Nothing had happened the first time he had tried to change himself, when he had woken up with a golden fur, because...

...because he hadn't concentrated enough.

He raised his arm again, frowning, concentrating, and remembering the lion's grace of movements when he had seen them in the park. He closed his eyes, concentrating on a muscled paw, imagining the strong muscles, the golden fur, the claws. He suddenly felt a tingling, slowly starting from his shoulder and soon encompassing his whole arm. Not only the skin like last time. His whole arm felt like it was pierced by a thousand needles for a whole minute. He gasped at the pain but kept concentrating. His mind was ablaze but he kept concentrating. When the pain subsided, he opened his eye.

What he saw made him gasp, again.

He had a paw, now.

He tried to wiggle his fingers, but nothing moved. Instead, inch-long white claws unsheathed themselves from his golden fur covered new arm.

Excited now, he tried to transform his head like he had unconsciously done earlier. He closed his eye, and envisioned the lion's head, including its throat and mane. It was more difficult than the arm, because he had to change many more organs than just skin, muscle and bone. He spent five minutes in self-inflicted agony before opening his eyes again. He couldn't see himself and didn't dare removing his hand from Joan's grasp, but his eyes were both working, and his tongue could lick his face like before. He sighed in satisfaction of being able to do something like this, but the sound that escaped his throat wasn't a sigh.

It was a deep purr.

He jumped in surprise, and his move made Joan stir. Panicked about his state, and not having time to concentrate, he took the best decision he could think of. He took her hand in his again, laid himself

alongside her, hiding his head and paw in the bed sheets. And he waited, hoping that she wouldn't wake completely.

When it was clear that she was asleep again, he sighed.

And the purr escaped his throat again.

Joan's move then surprised him, as she pushed herself closer to him and sighed in contentment. Surprised at her reaction, he purred again and she sighed again. Turning his head to watch her, he was surprised to see a smile on her face. If this was soothing her, he thought, he would continue. He purred for a good part of the night, only pausing to transform his paw back into a human arm. Tired, he stopped when the bedside clock indicated 4am, and had a hard time concentrating to transform his head back into his own. After ten minutes of tingling in his face, he felt he was back to his original state, and slumped on Joan's bed.

"I should have known."

The tone wasn't angry, but serious enough to bring his senses back. He was lying in a soft bed, not the harder couch as usual, and sat up with a start. Michael was in the doorway, frowning at them. True, he was in Joan's bed, and, judging by Joan's position, they had been unconsciously cuddling after he had passed out. But Michael's serious tone was denied by his twinkling eyes and curled lips. To Gabriel's inquiring expression, he nodded towards his daughter, who was stirring in her sleep. The smile that was there was a reward in itself for all the nights that he had spent staying up.

He wasn't completely tired because of them, though: he had told Michael that, when he was staying with his daughter in the mornings, he wanted to wander in the city to ponder about things. Michael, suspecting that it was about his grieving about Grace, hadn't inquired about where. During a couple of hours, then, Gabriel isolated himself in his hideaway to sleep his tiredness away. With the special rooms' time frame, he could sleep a whole night in two hours anyway, before going back to the fair and Joan.

That morning, a happier Joan took her breakfast with them, and Michael, while engaged in the conversation, didn't dare to ask the question that was burning his lips. At the end of the meal, though, he couldn't hold it anymore.

"Why are you happy this morning?" Seeing her falling face, he quickly amended. "I mean, I want you to be happy, and all, but if I can push things to make you happy, I'd want to know which ones." Sensing he was babbling, he lowered his voice, and muttered. "I hope I'm understandable now."

Surprisingly, her light laughter echoed in the room at his comment. "I slept well, dad. I haven't had a nightmare, and I even dreamt. I was jumping around with big cats, and one of them even cuddled with me afterwards."

Looking at her, Michael could only wonder about it, until he looked at Gabriel. The boy was obviously happy about her, but was also avoiding his gaze. Strange...

Still, if she was happy, he didn't see anything wrong about them. He had to make sure with Gabriel that he wasn't to sleep in her bed regularly. He was her father after all.

The end of holidays came soon enough and the back-to-school time rolled around, the kids soon finding themselves on the start of the next term. Michael went back to his job as bank teller, and Gabriel and Joan went back to school. They had talked about the episode a little bit, Joan obviously uncomfortable, and had decided that they weren't to mention it with their friends. For the moment.

The school schedule had a period where they could do as they please, but were encouraged to take part in the proposed activities. The previous term, Gabriel had chosen a crash course in English environment, which took him up-to-date with the current events of the world. Kevin had chosen a computer basic programming course, which had introduced him to cryptography, and Jason preferred to visit museums. Tamara had wanted to participate in an additional athletic course, and Joan preferred a writing club.

Each term, most of the activities changed, and, even if they could take the same again, they had to choose new ones to allow everyone to choose every activity they wanted at some point. Kevin took a gaming group, Tamara chose another sport not involving water, and Jason went into the writing club that Joan had just left. Gabriel was adamant in following Joan, though, and when she chose riding, he followed. He wasn't sure to be actually able to mount a horse, but he followed nonetheless.

After a week, he was sore. After two weeks, he was sore. After three weeks, he was tempted to leave, but kept going on, as Joan was clearly enjoying herself. He only started to enjoy himself during the fourth week, when they had to push their horses to a little gallop across the field, one after the other. On the short time that it had lasted, he had closed his eye a few seconds, enjoying the sensation of wind in his hair, something that he had forgotten. During these seconds, he felt a tugging in his mind, like all the time he was experiencing something related to his past, but he also felt his back starting to tingle. Startled, he opened his eye, the feeling stopping, and he took control of his horse again. As these were horses specially bred for beginners, they were very docile and he didn't have any difficulty to halt it where he had to.

During that month, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The school jocks were preoccupied by their own problems and had left them mostly alone. The others from the group had sensed Joan's distress at one point, but had been diplomatic enough not to ask any question about it. They had continued their extracurricular activities, though, and Tamara and Gabriel had entered the local dojo, where they practised martial arts, something that improved their meditation. She hadn't talked with him about her outburst after the tattooing, however, and he was still wondering about the whole episode.

When winter holidays came, the group spent a few days in Jason parents' cottage again, and had a good time playing games outside with the snow, and inside also. They didn't try another role-playing game or magic show, and Gabriel was thankful for that.

During the holiday time, Michael was operating his stall alone, but Joan and Gabriel joined him as soon as they came back from the remote cottage. Joan was still a little wary about the fair environment, but Gabriel tried everything he could to bring smiles on her face. They all were still sad, though, about Grace not being there.

During the remaining days of vacation, Gabriel decided to see if the old bookstore was still there. After checking if Michael or Joan needed him, he informed them of his destination and left towards the nearby shop. Arriving there, he got quite a shock in discovering that the dark and previously dusty store had been decorated in a light blue colour theme, more appropriate for the current shelves' content.

The high shelves which contained large and old tomes had been replaced by lower ones containing books for children. Mathilda had completely changed the store, and there was even a small place where parents could leave their kids to play, and where in fact a few kids were playing. He re-introduced himself after all that time, and congratulated her on her achievements. He helped her for a short while, but, as the shop didn't have advanced books anymore, he was quickly disappointed and left earlier than he intended. As he left, he wasn't aware of a little girl, aged no more than 4, pointing towards him to her mother.

As he didn't know the neighbourhood at all, having spent all his time there in the fair, he decided to explore a little bit before coming back, while reflecting about his life at the same time. Almost nobody was in the street, as people either stayed at home or went to the fair. When passing on a small pedestrian bridge nearby, he kicked a loose pebble into the water stream under it, and was surprised to hear exclamations following the splash.

The stream was narrow, and there was a path on its side, which went under the bridge. He suspected that there had been people down there, and was ready to apologize, when said people showed their angry faces. And Gabriel saw red.

There, in front of him, he recognized the face of his aggressors. The ones whose leader had had a skull-decorated scarf but didn't have it now. The ones who, he was sure of that now, had assaulted Joan.

He didn't even need to go down to get them, though, as they were ascending the stairs next to the bridge. They obviously weren't in good shape, having slept outside for most of the time. On top of that, the thick rolled cigarette that graced the mouth of some of them was a clear indication of the reason behind their stoned attitude. Still, even in that state, they were four against one, and they had knives. Gabriel, though, was so enraged that he didn't think about that.

"Hey, lookit him," one of them snarled "t'is scar-face again!"

"Yeah, him, yeah."

"Let's get him!"

They lunged to him, but he was prepared, now. Not only was he more proficient with his body thanks to the martial arts practised with Tamara, he was also stronger thanks to his hideaway's weight bar. And he knew they were there, unlike his previous encounter with them. He crouched when two of them jumped on him, and with a quick leg swipe, sent them both sprawling on the walkway. He jumped up, and sent a double punch in the third underling's stomach, making him collapse and vomit his last meal. The leader, seeing them on the floor, seemed less inclined to fight, but he wasn't one to let a boy get to him. He wasn't going to flee!

He got his knife out, and Gabriel took a fighting stance, having learnt how to deflect such attacks. Besides, the other one was a little wobbly, and he thought that it was going to be easy.

He hadn't counted on the other ones getting up again, though. Even if they were still high, two of them had stood up, and they jumped on him at the same time as Johnny lunged forward. His movement could only start, and, even if it saved his life, he got his arm impaled with a nasty-looking knife. The pain brought him to his sense, and, seeing the danger, he could only think of one way out, the consequences be damned.

"Safehaven."

Nobody had noticed the man nearby, and he disappeared at the same time Gabriel did.  
Hogwarts dungeons...

...which include a certain staff member's private apartments.

The man was performing his hideous monthly task. He had laughed at the werewolf when he was younger, but was now reduced to the same level, almost. It was just after dinner, and despite the food he had just ingested, he was still hungry, a state he had grown used to. He prepared the usual jar, which was empty now, and put his heavy cloak, cursing winter for its lack of resources. He then grabbed a watch and attached it to his wrist, cursing the Headmaster like he was doing ten times a year, because the muggle artefact wasn't even working. Uttering the activation word, he found himself in muggle London. Again. More specifically, he was in a trashy area where homeless and drunk people would try to spend the night unharmed, whether it is by rats, weather, or other people.

The man wasn't exactly 'other people', but in fourteen years of activity, he hadn't killed anyone, only taking what was necessary, and sometimes even leaving something in return. The temptation had been great a couple of times, though. Damn him, he thought, kicking a trashcan, and succeeding, by an unknown way, in hurting himself.

While searching for a valid prey, he reflected about his life, the decisions he had had to make, and the consequences that had ensued.

Flashback: about 15 years ago...

"Let me go!"

The shouting creatures pulled on its chains, but they were heavy, and magically reinforced. It yelled so much that some of the people surrounding it put their hands to their ears. Their leader, though, was revelling in the creature's distress. Even if that one beast didn't practise magic, they had had to track it to the darkest recesses of London, waiting for it to be hungry. They also lost two people during

its capture. But now, on the floor before Voldemort and his followers, a vampire laid, yelling and cursing.

Casting a silencing spell on the trashing creature so that he could be heard by his followers, the dark lord explained that, using the vampire's blood, they could become more powerful than before. The quantity needed was to be dosed precisely, so as to give the maximum power while not letting the imbibor endangered by the sun. Voldemort was to be a dark lord in the day as well as in the night, not another vampire cell leader, like there were so many in Europe already.

However, as the vampire was famished, thus didn't have much blood, they had to give him some blood before being able to take his. And the blood that was the most powerful was the one of young virgins.

Some of the less hardened Death Eaters shuddered, but Voldemort raised his hand. No need to be angsty, he informed them, as the blood had already been fetched. He called upon a follower and the man brought him a jar which had been under a cloth. A 5-liter transparent jar full of blood. Voldemort then called upon his preferred potion maker, who was on the brink of gaining his title of Potion Master.

Severus Snape took the proffered jar, and, tilting it in front of the vampire, started to steadily pour the liquid into the thirsty beast's mouth. During the ceremony that ensued, each of the Death Eaters got a little of the vampire's blood to drink, thus becoming part-vampire themselves. The blood hunger wasn't really a problem, as they were going to dominate the world anyway, and that each and every muggle would be considered like cattle. Obviously, they hadn't thought of a defeat, and when Voldemort would be reduced to the state of a shadow a short time later, those who would be imprisoned in Azkaban would suffer from the hunger on top of the Dementor's effect.

After the bloody ceremony, Severus Snape went home, which was a small house in London suburb area. It had been his parents' secondary home and they gave it to him the day he graduated, on the condition that his 15 years old brat-of-a-sister could live in it as often and as long as she wanted.

Melinda. His sister.

When he arrived home, he called for her to indicate that he was home, but she wasn't there. He spent the following week adjusting to his new powers and rampaging with his Death Eaters comrades to quench their newly-acquired thirst. After two weeks of having no news about her, something she had never done before, he asked his parents, but they were as surprised as him because they had thought she was with him. He began to search for her whenever and wherever he could. That's in this state of mind that he got called once for a Death Eater meeting and its subsequent attack. When leaving the meeting area, though, which was the same as the one where they had taken blood from the vampire, he noticed a darkened room with someone lying in it, behind a half-closed door. Someone vaguely familiar. If the door wasn't closed, the person couldn't be dangerous, he reflected, before separating from the others and entering the room. What he saw, though, made him retch.

There, lying in a grotesque posture on the cold stone floor, with a skin as white as chalk but marred with putrefaction, was his sister. Judging from the wound on her jugular and the rope on her feet, she had been emptied from her blood like a pig, and had been left there afterwards. The infamous jar was there too. His stomach heaved again when he remembered pouring blood in the vampire mouth. Virgin blood. Her blood. Which now flowed in his own veins. His subsequent yell reverberated in the large house, unheard by the other Death Eaters, who had left the premises already.

He had joined the Death Eaters full of love for a fleeting woman; he would leave them full of hate for their deed. Taking his sister's body with him, and still grasping the jar, he Apparated home before calling the man he would have called last an hour ago. The man he had been raised to hate. The man who would perhaps give him a second chance. Albus Dumbledore.

Back to the present...

Holding the jar, which he had kept to remember his sister and his hideous behaviour leading to her death, Severus Snape quieted his

memories upon finding a couple of beggars snoring under a broken porch. Looking around, he saw no one, so, growing his fangs, he went to sate his hunger on the two poor men. He always took around a third of his preys' blood only, their body being able to make some to replace it. To sate his hunger, though, he had to find more people. At least six were necessary to quench his thirst and to fill the infamous jar. The jar was there to allow him to survive a month in the castle without hurting the other inhabitants, staff and students.

That night, though, luck wasn't on his side, as he hadn't deemed necessary to cast a sleeping spell on them, and the first man was a light sleeper. When the beggar felt himself being emptied of his blood, he woke with a start, and tried to rise, not acknowledging the man sucking on his neck at first. However, his movement caused his flesh to tear, and blood flew freely everywhere. He began to yell, and the vampire recoiled, looking left and right in fright. Seeing people awakening in the area, Severus Snape panicked, and he portkeyed back into Hogwarts, his jar still empty, and his hunger not sated.

When he reappeared in his room, though, he could only curse himself, as he remembered now that the portkey watch worked only once a month. If he wanted to feed some more, he would have to exit the castle by walking, and that could raise questions, especially in his disarrayed state. Only Dumbledore knew about his problem, and he didn't want to be cast out of the school, as, as Jugson had said, it was his only protection against Voldemort. Now that he possessed Jugson, though, he had more leverage on the dark lord, and could feed him false information, supposedly acquired from Jugson's charges. He had thought about a plan to discredit Pansy Parkinson, but hadn't had time to put it into motion.

The sound that suddenly came from the entrance of his quarters startled him, to the point of almost dropping the empty jar. Someone was knocking on the door, repeatedly. Not thinking about his appearance, as he had left his thoughts wander, he opened the door brusquely, ready to throw the impudent intruder away.

It was Hermione. And when she noticed his state, she yelled in fright. He had retracted his fangs, thankfully, but there was blood around his mouth, on his collar, and on his clothes. His skin was white and his

eyes were bloodshot. A quick glance around made him take a swift decision. He pulled her inside and shut the door.

“What in the hell are you doing here?” he asked urgently, and not quite that politely, “You want to wake the damn castle?”

“Professor... sorry, but... are you well?”

“I’m perfectly well, thank you!” he barked. They both noticed his hands trembling, before he tried to hide them behind his back. He wasn’t comfortable and preferred to sit, before continuing in the same tone “What brought you here?”

She recoiled at the voice, visibly shrinking, and answered in a little voice. “I don’t have anymore potion, sir.”

He quickly understood her meaning. She was addicted to the Dreamless Sleep draught now, and couldn’t sleep without at least a spoonful of it. He stood up suddenly, with the intent of giving her one of the flask from his study, but he quickly fell back on his chair, dizzy from his hunger.

“Professor?”

She approached him warily, not understanding how the usually calm and collected Professor could be in that state.

“Professor?”

He answered softly. “Go away, Hermione, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t understand. Why would you hurt me?”

“You know Lupin’s monthly illness?” At her nod, he grew his fangs and continued, “I’m worse.” At the time, his favourite student’s well-being was more important than his teaching position, as he clearly put himself in a position to be expelled.

She couldn't believe it. They had a Professor who was part vampire! Of course, they also had a werewolf Professor, but the vampire one had taught for much longer. More than a decade, if her favourite book was correct. How comes nobody ever noticed that? He mustn't be that dangerous, if he had stayed all this time without a hitch. Remembering all that she knew about vampires, she quickly assessed his situation.

"You're hungry." It wasn't a question, and at his pained reaction, she elaborated some more. "If I give you some blood, it won't kill me? You wouldn't kill me?"

Barely understanding what she was saying, he nodded, his nostrils flaring. How could she tempt him like that! She had to leave! She had to leave, before... Wait! Why was she nearing him? Why was she...

Hermione Granger had a very logical mind. Her Professor and fellow researcher was in pain, and she could think of only one immediate way to help him without raising alarm and endangering the man's position. Out of compassion, she gave her neck to him. And it was true that virgin blood was the most restorative one for a vampire. In a very special set of rooms...

When he arrived on the bed, bleeding from the deep wound on his arm, the room hummed for a moment, before strange sounds emanated from the bed. A silver platter appeared on the nightstand with a roll of tape on it. Gabriel didn't dare touching it, though, and, after a few seconds, the room hummed more strongly. Needles appeared on the platter, and the first one went straight to his valid arm, searching for a second before impaling in it and releasing a coloured liquid in his bloodstream. He hadn't time to ponder about this, though, as the liquid was to make him sleep. He didn't see the mechanical arm extending from under the bed, placing the bewitched medical tape on his wound. The tape sucked the toxins from the rusty blade and cleaned the wound, before sealing it and merging with the skin.

Gabriel slept for a few hours, before waking with a start. Where was he? Where were his attackers? He slowly remembered what had

happened, and checked his watch. The action elicited a gasp of pain, but his wound had disappeared during his nap. The area was still sore, though.

On the spot, he decided to practise more. Strength, endurance, and transformation into a lion. He had remarked previously that it was quicker and easier to transform each time he tried. He knew how to concentrate, and his martial arts meditation techniques were helping. Reflecting about his encounter with the thugs, he decided that he couldn't attack them like that again. He had been lucky that they were high; otherwise he could have been killed. He thought some more about that, and the fact that the room had healed him, and it reminded him something from the book on transportation devices. When he had started to translate it, he had started from the beginning before going straight into chapter five. And the table of content he had decoded presented the different chapters. He suddenly remembered that one of them was about 'Activation upon Health Condition.' Linking that to the encounter, he decided to try to configure his ring to bring him in this room if he ever was unconscious due to a fight. No need to fall down and be killed by those ruffians. He also vowed to train himself so that he could transform into a lion quickly and beat them to a pulp if needed.

They spent the few remaining days of vacation in the fair, Gabriel only isolating a couple of hours a day in his hideaway to practise his lion form, read his book, and also sort through all the stuff that he had brought. The books from Ginevra Shaun took most of the bookcase, and his numerous sketchpads found a place in the second drawer. He didn't dare put something in the first, as it was the place where paper and quill had magically appeared on his request. His stuff from living with Grace found a place in the cupboard, and Madam Shaun's now-empty trunk was stowed in the sport room.

On one of his training sessions, he idly remarked that, if he could transform into a lion while concentrating on it, perhaps he could transform into something else as well? He stuck copies of his drawings of the winged lion and the phoenix in his sport room, but laid the thought aside for a while, intent on finishing his understanding of the ring's mechanisms.

Hogwarts, Dumbledore's office...

“Thank you, Nymphadora.”

“I warn you, Albus. Even with your advanced age, I may hurt you if you call me by my given name again.”

He chuckled, and continued with his usual twinkle in his eyes.

“Agreed then. Thank you, Miss Tonks.”

She huffed. Nobody called her ‘Miss’ Tonks. Still that was better than her forename. What had her mother thought about? Anyway...

“Sure. Anytime. Especially as I didn’t do anything. Can you explain why you called for me so urgently that I had to shorten my mission in Romania to come here so that you could cast a single spell on little ol’ me?”

He smiled widely at this. “Yes, your... mission. It seems that it didn’t have anything to do with dragons at first, or am I mistaken?”

She blushed. The old man was too perceptive for his own good. Truly, she had had a mission in Romania, but it only took her a couple of hours to get the information from the willing vampire. Afterwards, she had spent all her time in the dragon reserve, flirting with a muscular redhead there.

Albus continued. “You see, we had an intrusion here...”

“Here? In Hogwarts? How comes the Auror weren’t notified?”

“If you would let me finish?”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“Someone had entered Hogwarts through a valid portkey, but the person wasn’t recognised by the castle as being a staff member. And it had happened... twice.”

“You didn’t catch him the second time?”

“Well... we are not specialists of law enforcement, or are we? I just put a spell on the area to be informed on the off chance that this would ever happen again, but no trap. The spell was to give me the real appearance of the person without being detected. And I only saw a blurry figure. As we, that is, the Headmistress and I, thought about it, it could have been a metamorphmagus. A young one.”

Understanding dawned on Tonks’ face. “And you asked me to come here to try your spell on me. Did it work? Am I... ‘blurry’?” She asked this with a mischievous stance denying the serious talk underneath.

He sighed. “Yes. And no. Your image is fuzzy, but I can still discern your true features. That boy – I know only that – was totally indistinct.”

They stayed silent for a while, drinking their tea and reflecting about the situation.

Northern London...

After the winter holiday break, the group of five teenagers found themselves together again. School went back on its track, and the multiple activities slowed down extracurricular activities somewhat. Gabriel still had his time-reduced hideaway, but, as he was living with Joan and Michael now, he couldn’t very well use it. Michael was a light sleeper, and Joan still needed his presence in some nights.

During these trips, though, he finally stumbled upon the passage that he was looking for. The book explained how to link a destination from the ring to a given health condition. Associating this information with the content of Madam Shaun’s diary, he was able to construct a sentence which, while without any sense in itself – like all activation words – would allow him to be transported into his Hideaway’s safety upon involuntary unconsciousness. He was quite proud of himself, because that wording included fight-induced blackout and would also work if he was to be drugged at some point. But then he realized that he couldn’t very well test it. And he had to test it, to be sure that he

wouldn't stay in a fight while being out for the count. He had to ask someone to help him.

He had a choice. Four, in fact. He could ask Joan, Jason, Kevin, or Tamara. These were the only ones who suspected that something magical was going on. After all, he couldn't deny that magic existed, now. He just wasn't sure to be a wizard himself. All his experience with the ring and the hideaway had been through seemingly meaningless spoken words and external objects. The only personal thing was his lion transformation, which, while now complete, was still long and painful. And incomplete. He had reflected about it, as, each time he transformed into the whole animal, he felt something missing.

He shrugged the feeling away. If he could transform quickly, that would be sufficient for now. Returning to his quandary, he took his head in his hands. Joan was still unstable from her trials; Jason was always quiet and nobody ever knew what he really thought; Kevin would ask him endless explanations; and Tamara...

He suddenly remembered everything about her. He would ask her, and he also had other questions to ask. As he had leverage on her, about her mastering fire, he could tell her secret things while being quite sure that she wouldn't repeat them. The only question now was: how in the hell could he persuade her to make him fall unconscious? Later, in a dojo...

“What do you want?”

As friends, they had been paired to practise moves, and he had asked her to meet him that evening.

“I want you to explain me some things, and I'm willing to offer information.”

Gabriel knew that Tamara would buy that. That had been her own words, when they had been in Jason parents' remote cottage, before Halloween.

She looked left and right. "Your place or mine?"

"Yours. You know that I live with Joan now."

"True." Without entering into details, the group of friends had been informed of Grace's death, and that Gabriel was now living with the Freyrs. "Mine, then. At eight?"

He thought about it, before nodding his acceptance.

At eight that evening, and after having lied to Michael and Joan, explaining that he had forgotten to speak to Tamara about the incoming competition, Gabriel knocked at Tamara's house door. She had been waiting for him, and opened it immediately. Taking his hand, she shushed him and quickly dragged him towards her room.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" She was practically hoping in glee.

He felt cornered. He hadn't wanted to actually tell her anything, just test his ring and ask about his neck mark. He tried to get information first.

"First, I want to know why you got in such frenzy about my neck mark."

That sobered her instantly, and she looked at him hesitantly, before nodding. She reflected a little, and started to answer. After all, she had wanted information first, and was ready to provide some first too.

"First of all, as I'm about to break really old secrecy laws, I want your word that you won't repeat anything that I say now, and I mean everything. Even to me. I know my room is quite safe from prying ears, but if you are to talk about it in school, for instance..."

"I understand, I understand. Okay..." he took a breath and raised his hand "I promise not to repeat anything." Lowering his hand, he smiled to her. "Does that appease your qualms?"

She looked sternly at him, before smiling back. "You have no idea."

She turned serious again, and sat on the bed, next to him. If she was to speak about her secret, better it be in hushed tones.

"Gabriel, do you know what are fire, air, water, and earth?"

"Hmmm... yes?"

"I mean... collectively?"

"I think I saw a movie once, a Joan's place. Something about five elements..."

She laughed. "Well done! I mean, the film might be... what it might be, but at least you have an idea of what I mean." Turning serious again, she continued. "Except that there are four elements, not five. There are people in the world, Gabriel, who have control over one of these elements."

"Like... like you with the fire?" He started to understand, and that was opening strange avenues of thoughts.

"Yes. Generally, it's genetic, as my father, and his father before him, and a whole line of my ancestors were able to wield fire."

"Generally? Sometimes it's not?"

"Well, we don't have that much cases of spontaneous apparition of the talent, so we consider it mostly genetic. Furthermore, when two people with different elements decide to have a kid, the kid's talent will be... different. Let me show you."

She rose to take a blank sheet of paper, and drew four circles on it, each of them on a point of a diamond-shaped figure, and each of them intersecting the next. She continued to speak while drawing.

“See these circles? We call them spheres. Up here we have the Air element. Those people are... well, I won't talk about the others, because I don't want to be up all night, all right?”

“All right.” Gabriel was curious, but didn't want to push her.

“Down there it's Earth, and then you have Fire and Water. Note that there are oppositions there. Earth people will prefer not to take a plane, and I'd rather not practise a water-oriented sport, for instance.”

He nodded in understanding, and she continued.

“Almost all of us have a mark somewhere, and what had disturbed me in the tattoo parlour was that you had a mark like... like us. But it wasn't a usual mark.”

“What do you mean?” He started to panic.

“Calm down, calm down. Remember that I had a flame-like mark? Others have a mark in the shape of a drop of water, for instance. You, on the other hand... you have a lightning bolt.”

“What do you mean?” He couldn't bring himself to be more articulate than that.

“Look at the circles here. Remember I told you about different elements having kids? It's really rare, because people will tend to avoid their opposing element, and marry their own, or unoriented people...”

“Unoriented?”

“That's how we call those who don't have the talent. Now, see where these circles intersect? That's where the element of the kid will be, a mix of his parents'.”

She went silent for a moment.

“And?” He asked.

Tamara looked at him in the eye and continued. “Following my discovery of your neck mark, I made some research, and asked my father about it too. Surreptitiously, mind you. And I found what I wanted.”

“Between Fire and Earth, the mixed element is Lava. Between Earth and Water, it’s Mud. Between Water and Air is Cloud, and between Air and Fire...” She paused.

“Yes?”

“It’s Lightning.”

A pause.

A long pause.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” He stood up with a start and started to walk in circles. “I can’t be... I don’t...”

“Gabe...”

He didn’t hear her and continued to circle the room, before stopping, facing her. “I don’t have control over that, anyway.”

“Gabe...”

“You showed me that you controlled fire, okay. But I can’t control lightning. Besides, it’s impossible!”

“Gabe!”

He stopped ranting, surprised at her annoyed tone.

“People do not control their element spontaneously, Gabriel.” She explained. “They have to be trained.”

“Oh.”

He was silent for a moment, before asking. “Sorry about my outburst. Who will train me? You?”

She smiled. “Normally, it’s better for people to be trained by their own element. But...” she raised her hand, sensing that he was trying to object again. “But it’s possible to be trained by another, as long as it’s not an opposite. Besides, if what I suspect is true, as you are part fire, it may be possible for me to train you efficiently.”

A pause, again.

“Tamara?”

“Yes?”

“Will you train me? Please?”

“It depends, Gabriel.”

“On what?”

“I gave you information. It’s your turn now.” she said, with an amused glint in her eyes.

“Oh. Right.”

“Well?”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “Remember that I don’t have my memories to back up what I say, so it will be only projections. And we are not to speak about it again, okay? Same as what you said before.”

“Okay.”

“Well... I know that magic exists, and I can prove it.”

“Wow. How?”

“There’s a place I stumbled upon, using my ring.”

He showed her his ring, but she was looking at his hand, perplexed.

“What ring?”

“There.” he answered, wiggling his fingers. “Right there. Honestly, I had it since the summer, you didn’t even see it?”

“Gabriel?”

“What?”

“No.”

“No what?”

“I never saw it, and I still don’t see it.” She looked at him in wonder.  
“Is it invisible?”

“I don’t think so... I see it. Can you touch it, at least?”

He guided her hand towards the metallic band, and she nodded, still in awe.

“Where did you get it and when?”

“It was in my vault...” he suddenly stopped and took his head in his other hand, wincing in pain at the fleeting memory.

After he calmed down, she spoke again. “Obviously, you got it before the summer, right?”

“Right. I remember having it already when waking up in that... place.”

“How comes you never talked about it?”

“The subject never showed itself. Thankfully, huh? As I couldn't very well speak about an invisible ring.”

“You were speaking about a place.”

“Yes. My hideaway. Safehaven.”

And the bedroom disappeared.

To be continued in next chapter: Alleyways...

Wow, you say, it's way too much,  
I assure you the plot's such.  
To keep my wild side in check,  
Review, please, gimme a peck.

## Chapter 21 – Alleyways

She awoke on a bed. A quite hard one. Sounds were coming from the adjoining room, of bottles clanking and liquid bubbling. She slowly got up, checking herself. She felt weak, but alive, and the large breakfast waiting on the low table, surrounded by a warming spell, appealed to her. She had to check him before, though, and, gathering her strength and wits, she crossed the room towards the potion-making sounds.

“Hi.” She was too feeble to utter anything else, but the small sound was enough to make the man stumble, dropping the pewter jar on the floor. Thankfully, it had been empty. He looked at her for half a second, turned back towards the cauldron to lower the fire, and went back to her.

“How are you?” The Potion Master seemed genuinely worried.

“Weak. Hungry.”

He took her hand to lead her in the previous room. “Let’s eat, then. I asked for a private breakfast, and I took some blood-replenishing potions from the hospital ward, for you. I’m making a new batch of them, though, and nobody will notice.”

Hermione squeezed his hand, making him stop. She really was weak, and could only utter one word, before slumping in the armchair near the food.

“You?”

Severus understood the meaning, and looked at her in wonder. How could she do this to him, of any people? How could she give her blood freely, and how could she ask about his health when she was the one who had been bitten.

He remembered the episode and shuddered. If he could manage, he would do everything in his power not to do it again. He had been so intoxicated by the powerful and magical blood, coming from a willing

and virgin prey, that he almost couldn't stop. He had extracted his fangs after having drunk more than half of her blood, and her lack of blood was the reason behind her current weakened state. He hoped that the potions and the meal would give her some strength. If that was possible, nobody could ever know about that. Speaking of which...

He looked at the small teenager in the large armchair, too frail to raise her arm to eat, and took pity of her. He took a spoon and proceeded in feeding her, to her surprised gaze. After the first spoonfuls of soup, he uncorked the two vials on the table, and made her drink their content. She let him do it, unable to stop him anyway. But he saw in her eyes that she trusted him with her health.

He staggered suddenly. Apart from the old Headmaster, the only person to have displayed that level of trust before had been his baby sister, and she had been killed because of him. On the spot, he vowed to ease his charge's life, and it began by feeding her until she was strong enough to continue by herself. Not a word was exchanged, and none was needed.

After the meal, though, and after the peppering-up potion had kicked in, Hermione became stronger and they could discuss a little.

"So?" She started.

"What?"

"How are you?"

"I'm very well, thanks to you. But I can't do that to you again."

"I don't understand."

"Well, you see... for vampires, the blood of young teenagers... like yourself... is very powerful and intoxicating at the same time. I've never drunk anything like that before, and I got carried away, which explains your weakened state this morning. I'm not sure to be able to stop myself should the occasion present itself again. I don't want to

hurt you. Besides, if I did, the Board of Governors would make short work of my position.”

“I won’t say anything.”

A pause.

“I don’t ask for forgiveness, Hermione.”

“It’s not that. I mean, if you were a vampire for all this time, and nothing had transpired, you would have taken precautions, wouldn’t you? It’s my fault I barged in last night. However, can you explain something to me?”

Snape was flabbergasted, but shook himself and answered. “If you ask the question.”

“You are not really a vampire, right? Otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to go outside during the day. What are you?”

After a long and thoughtful pause, he answered. “The story is complicated, and so far, only Albus knows.”

She smiled. “Please, do you think I might not be able to understand it? Besides, you owe me an explanation, at least.”

“True.”

He proceeded in telling her his whole story, without omitting anything. She didn’t interrupt him. And when he finished speaking about his sister, she did something that shocked him. She hugged him. Nobody had hugged him after Melinda’s death, fifteen years ago. Too stunned to react, he let himself be hugged for a few seconds, before she rose again.

“I’d better go, now, or the others will think I have been abducted by some monster...” Her smile and the glint in her eyes was a clear indication of the joking nature of the comment, and he smiled too.

“Thank you, Hermione. For everything.”

She nodded, before answering. “I’ll come back later, Professor. Don’t you forget my research about the new Lingua Potion!” She then opened the door quietly, checked left and right, and, seeing no one around, left the room.

At the Ministry of Magic, Creatures Department...

Kingsley Shacklebolt wasn’t happy. But he knew the signatures on the document. Still, the request was strange. Hogwarts wanted to do some research about the Dementors? He shuddered, thinking of his own reaction when they were near. How could teachers allow such creatures in the castle? Still, he reflected, the castle was surely large enough to detain them in a secluded cell. Still, the only reason he could accept this was because the current Headmistress and previous Headmaster had signed it. Hogwarts’ Head Boy, who was also the current Minister’s son and his precious aid in the summer, also known as Percy Weasley, had also vouched on the students’ behalf, and the Minister himself has seen it and attached a note to say that he had been informed of this and that he saw nothing wrong in it.

Signing the transfer order in front of the scrawny employee facing him, he gave it back for execution and sighed about it. Why would anyone want to study Dementors anyway? Returning to his pile of work, he totally missed the unholy glee that had appeared on the employee’s eyes.

In a remote cottage, a mere three hours afterwards...

A scrawny and recently induced Death Eater barged in and kneeled, head down, in front of Voldemort and his current ‘Inner circle’ which consisting of his five older followers.

“My Lord, My Lord, I have a present from Azkaban!”

Needless to say, upon being interrupted on a scheme to snatch a Dementor from the wizarding prison, Voldemort was quite angered,

and started to curse the impudent. However, he calmed rapidly when his mind finished processing what the now screaming man had said. Lifting the torture spell, he addressed him.

“Your life now depends on the quality of the present, Gerhart.”

“It’s...” he coughed blood, obviously having bitten his own mouth during the Cruciatus. “It’s a... a Dementor, my Lord.”

“How did you get it?”

“Hogwarts wanted one, and I snatched it during the transfer, knowing that you wanted one for yourself at one point. It’s right outside these doors, my Lord, waiting in its special travelling cell. Was I wrong, my Lord? Should I send it to the school?”

Voldemort was thinking, reflecting about the reason behind Hogwarts actually wanting a Dementor. The only one he could think of made him shiver internally. They couldn’t have uncovered his whole plan! He had kept it hidden from even his closest followers!

“No, no. You did well. But you have to learn manners. You’ll put the creature in our prison cell in the left wing basement, and you’ll scrub the cell.”

Thinking that his punishment was light, the man started to rise, but Voldemort added something that made him flinch.

“In that order.” The possessed body of Barty Crouch Jr then turned towards the large man guarding the entrance. “Weasley, you’ll monitor him. Make sure that the Dementor doesn’t leave. You’ll fetch Gerhart as soon as the room is clean.”

As soon as they left, he addressed his inner circle again.

“One problem solved, one less to go. Have you searched for the spell we talked about, Jugson?”  
In Gabriel’s Hideaway...

He hadn't known if she would follow. After all, not counting his aggression, it was the first time that he used his ring while in direct view of someone. The thugs had been holding onto him, and hadn't followed. Now, Tamara had been touching the ring itself.

And they now were both sitting on his hideaway bed's edge.

Gabriel was silent, reflecting about all this, while Tamara had her mouth agape, taking in her surroundings. As she didn't seem to be able to speak, he began.

"Welcome to my hideaway."

"What is this place? And how did we arrive here?"

"The place is totally isolated. I don't even know where it is, as it obviously doesn't have doors or windows. And how did we arrive here? I don't know, but your guess is as good as mine. By magic?"

He started to explain some of the more interesting things, the weigh bar and the plate. Seeing that she was still silent, he positioned her hand on the ring, and spoke the activation words to come back to her place.

"So, what do you think?"

"Gabe, it's... it's marvellous, and strange at the same time!"

"I know, I know, but that's all I know. I don't know how that ring was made, nor how the rooms themselves were made. Perhaps, if I recover my memory, I'd be able to understand more, but each time I reflect about my past, or each time I inadvertently speak about it, something strange happen. Huge black humanoid shapes appear in my mind and I start to feel so much pain that I can't continue thinking about it."

"Have you tried to meditate?"

“Yes, and it has been helpful, as I know about these black things now. Before, it was only the pain.”

“Keep trying, then.”

As it has been some time now, she yawned, and looked at her watch. The movement wasn't lost to Gabriel who smugly asked her to check on her bedside alarm clock. She did that, suspicious, and noticed that the two items didn't show the exact same time. She was trying to decide which one was wrong, when he spoke.

“It's your watch.”

Surprised, she wheeled around. “What?”

“Your alarm clock is accurate, your watch is not.”

She looked at him apprehensively. “Did you hear my thoughts?”

He raised his hands protectively. “No, but I had the same questions when I came back from the magicked rooms, the first time. You see, I didn't know then how to get out of them, and I had to spend almost thirty hours in it, decrypting the owner's notes. She's dead, by the way. And when I came back, thinking I missed a whole day of school, only the night had passed. The time flows differently there.”

Her jaw was still hanging, trying to decide if he was pulling her leg or not. But her watch was the proof. She always set it to the same time as her alarm clock, and had changed the battery recently.

Gabriel spoke again, hesitantly this time. “Errm... Tam?”

She closed her mouth and looked at him inquiringly. “What?”

“I may have... a request... a strange request.”

“Go ahead.”

He looked around, and noticed her cricket bat. He went to take it, and gave it to her.

“Knock me down.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“The ring has a special... setting... whatever, that I configured to take me there in the case I was unconscious at some unforeseen point. You see, I have been attacked, more than once, and I don’t want to lay comatose in the street ever again. I have to test that, though, and it has to be done by someone else. Knock me down, and if I disappear, everything will be fine. If I don’t, my work wouldn’t have been successful, and you’ll have to wake me up.”

She was barely processing his bizarre request, but acquiesced nonetheless. Taking the bat, she asked for a last confirmation. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Positive. And don’t worry, I’ll be fine. The rooms can also heal me.”

“Okay. Brace yourself.” And she whacked him behind the head.

He slumped on the floor, unconscious.

And disappeared.

She stood still for a few minutes, before shaking herself awake. She stored the bat away, and sat on her bed, waiting. A few minutes afterwards, a person shimmered into view. Gabriel was holding the back of his head, wincing.

“Okay. It worked.”

“You’re fine? You seem to have recovered quickly, though.”

“Remember the time difference?”

“Oh. Yes.”

“Thanks, Tam.”

“Sure, Gabe. Anytime you want me to paddle your head, just ask me.”

They smiled, before going to the door. Gabriel went home, while Tamara returned in her room, her mind full of information. She was a little disappointed, though, that Gabriel hadn't showed her something that he was capable of. She had only seen magical items, but she suspected that he could do some strange stuff by himself too. Reflecting about the fact that she didn't tell him everything about the elements either, she suspected that another information sharing meeting would be scheduled soon.  
Hogwarts...

Three days after their request, Hermione and Severus still hadn't got information about their delivery, and started to get upset. After all, the potion was ready, and it wouldn't stay fresh for too long. They had done everything to get the creature in the castle, even persuading Percy to vouch for it.

They inquired about this to Dumbledore, who talked to McGonagall, who contacted Shacklebolt, who answered that the delivery order had been given immediately. Upon contacting the prison, they found it strange that a Dementor had effectively been removed from there, but hadn't been sent to Hogwarts. That could mean many things, but the most obvious, at least in Hermione's eyes, was also the most dreadful. Voldemort could be in possession of the missing creature, and that meant that they had to speed up their own research. If the Dark Lord was to find how to persuade the dark creatures to ally with him, he would take over the prison, recover his long-lost followers, and start a new reign of terror. Few wizards knew how to defend against Dementors, and even those who knew how weren't always able to effectively cast the famous Patronus spell. As she was speaking about this with Dumbledore and Snape, they all shuddered on the thought of Dementors rampaging neighbourhoods, wizarding

as well as muggle. As the circumstances asked to act quickly, they filled the same form again, asking the same people to vouch, and telling them that the first form had been lost.

Albus Dumbledore would follow the document wherever it passed, and he would have as secondary mission to check the people who would handle it about possession or magical traces of Voldemort. Although he didn't find anyone guilty, he was successful in bending the laws to bring two Dementors back. He had reflected, at one point, that the older students could train themselves against a real one for their Patronus spell, thus gaining a little edge should Voldemort succeed in liberating the prison.

They were two days late, comparing to Voldemort, but their potion was almost ready and different batches had been prepared, only needing to be tested now. That had been possible thanks to the joint effort from the Potion Master and Hermione. The old Professor had asked himself how it had come that a Gryffindor could work so efficiently with the previously irascible Slytherin Head, but thanked his good stars that it had been possible.

As they didn't want to endanger students by making them drink test potions, and as Snape was adamant not to let Hermione drink some, the Potion Master got the job to try them, and Hermione and Madam Pomfrey would be there to assist him. Dumbledore was there as well, having decided to take notes about everything. And one of the Dementors was there, in his transport cell. Even from there, though, the creature's effect could be felt everywhere in the room, and nobody was humorous now.

Upon imbibing the first potion, Snape put his hand to his ears and screamed, before collapsing, shivering. Mumbling about too much asphodel, Hermione levitated him to his bed where Madam Pomfrey checked on his vital stats. When it appeared that he was only unconscious, they woke him up magically, and asked about it. "What happened?"

"I heard cries of pain, and I felt it. I think I felt a part of whatever pain they inflicted to the people they killed. Some of the personalities I got

in touch with were really old, and had suffered for a long time, probably centuries.”

Albus was scribbling, taking notes and inferring primary conclusions. “It may be like the potion of Empathy, Severus?”

“Yes, Albus, although I don’t remember using the same elements.”

“We’ll try that later. Are you ready for the next?”

Bracing himself, Snape nodded and went next to the creature. This time, he took a chair and sat on it with the potion glass in his hand. He raised his cup to his lips, drank it, and froze.

“Severus! Severus!” Madam Pomfrey rushed to the statue-like form of the Potion Master. They tried to cast enervate on him, unsuccessfully. They also tried to move him, but it was as if he was stuck to his chair. He wouldn’t budge. They finally decided to wait to see if the potion was limited in time.

After an hour, they noticed the first stirrings. Small eye movements and twitching in his fingers. They had to wait another hour to get the Potion Master back to his full capacity. He was panting, and appeared really tired.

“Your conclusions, Severus?”

Snape was so tired that he only could mutter a few words while lying on his bed. “Potion... slows time. Read... lips... seem to talk. Too... too high, and... can’t answer... anyway.”

He went to sleep immediately, and Dumbledore went to put the Dementor cell in the adjoining room. No need to plague the Potion Master’s sleep with nightmares. After he came back, he conjured some tea, and addressed a thoughtful Hermione.

“So, Miss Granger, your ideas?”

“I don’t know, sir. We might have put too much of the Adaptive draught in it. But, from what he said, he might have heard something from them. After all, they still have a mouth, even if we discovered that it didn’t contain a tongue after all. They perhaps have a language of their own. We just have to observe them. Sir?”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to have permission to bring both of them in a cell, to study how they interact.”

“It’s an interesting idea, Miss Granger. I don’t see why you’d ask for permission.”

She looked at him pointedly, and repeated her question.

“I’d like to have permission to bring them both in a cell, for me to study how they interact.”

“Oh! I’m sorry, but...”

“Professor Snape will be up when you’ll have put them both in place, and he’ll certainly make sure that I don’t have any problems. Besides, it’s my... our research project.”

The old man looked at her, then at the sleeping form of said Professor, seeming lost in thought. He then nodded, and agreed, although reluctantly.

Hermione wasn’t finished, though.

“ I’d like you to nullify Hogwarts’ interference about muggle electronics in the room, sir. I have an idea that could be tried using some muggle devices.”

Albus Dumbledore and Poppy Pomfrey looked at each other in wonder, before the old man asked “Which kind?”

“Advanced sound processing devices, mainly. If what I think is true, from what Professor Snape said before collapsing, they might actually communicate with sound, but we humans can’t hear them.”

The Transfiguration Professor shook his head. “I’m sorry about that, but even I can’t lower Hogwarts interference on muggle devices. I’ve heard of one of the Professors who was able to, but it was a long time ago, and nobody ever studied the field since then.”

“Which field, Professor?”

“Technomancy.”

She thought about it for a moment, before answering. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“It is about mixing muggle devices with magic. With Grindewald, then Voldemort campaigning against muggles, each and every wizard involved in that field either died or abandoned it. The last one I knew was teaching here, it was...” he looked down at his cup, before continuing, in a subdued tone, “it was Harry’s grandmother.”

“Harry’s grandmother? How comes he never talked about it?” Glancing at the shameful face of the old man, she elaborated. “You haven’t talked him about it, have you?”

He shook his head, and tried to justify. “I hadn’t known this, as she was teaching under her maiden name. It was a fluke we made the connection, as I only remembered about her when we had this intrusion...”

“Which intrusion?”

He sighed, reflecting that she was too perceptive for her own good, or he was plainly too old for verbal jousting. “We had a... unknown person, portkeying in here. Twice. In Professor Shaun’s old office.”

“Who’s Professor Shaun?”

“She was the Technomancy Professor we are talking about. Harry’s grandmother.”

“Okay. Who was it? The intruder, I mean.”

“We don’t know.”

She looked at him in bewilderment. “You don’t know? You don’t know?”

“Minerva and I discussed about it, and despite a spell, I was only able to determine that it was a boy.”

“How old?”

“I don’t know either. Between twelve and eighteen, I’d say. But I know that he’s a proficient metamorphmagus. Perhaps even more than Tonks.”

“Who’s Tonks? And what’s a metamorphmagus?” Hermione was learning many things today.

He sighed. “She is an Auror, and she can change her facial features. Interesting for cover missions. She’s the only alive metamorphmagus I know about, as the gift is pretty rare.”

“Thank you. I think I understand better now. But... how comes the Ministry could have approved teaching something that goes against the Office of Muggle Artefact Misuse? When Ron’s father wasn’t Minister, he often talked about it.”

“That Office had been created by Fudge soon after he came into his position.”

“Oh. Okay. So, I guess that it has disappeared now?”

“Not yet. But with Arthur on the job, I guess that its employee will be dispatched on other services soon.”

She nodded, and they stayed silent for a long time, the silence only broken by the Potion Professor's deep breathing and the clanking of their teacups.

Hermione started again. "So, what can we do? We can't really set the Dementors free to study then, can we?"

"That's it. For this to work, we can't use Hogwarts. I could suggest a couple of places, but I gather that you want them nearby?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can use one of Hogsmeade abandoned houses. There is one in particular that can be reached through a subterranean passage from the castle."

"Not this one." The voice surprised them. Severus Snape was awake, although still lying on the bed, his face towards them, his eyes watching them intensely.

"Ah, nice to see you are up and about, Severus."

Getting up, the man answered. "Pleasure shared, Albus."

Standing also, Madam Pomfrey excused herself. "I'm sorry, but I have an infirmary to manage, so, if you'll excuse me..."

"Of course, Poppy," answered Dumbledore. "Thank you for being there."

After the hospital matron left, Severus Snape turned towards his senior colleague. "So, Albus, where is the creature?"

"Miss Granger suggested we put it away for our own comfort, yours included."

He passed his hand in his hair, trying to discipline it, but to no avail. The movement was noted by Hermione as one of Harry's numerous

habits. Besides, both of them had been working on the potions non-stop, and their face, hair, and hands held residue of potion ingredients. It wasn't helping the already greasy nature of the Potion Master's hair.

"Thank you. Why did you want to use the Shrieking Sack for?"

"You know about it?"

"Of course I know! I've almost been killed by a werewolf there, as if you wouldn't remember!"

Dumbledore thought about it somewhat, before nodding. "You are quite right, I hadn't recalled that little incident immediately..."

Snape snorted. "Little incident! Well..."

Fed up about the bantering, obviously about an old argument, Hermione interrupted them. "We have something to solve, then." At their inquiring stares, she continued. "Where are we going to put them?"

"What?"

Sensing that the Potion Master needed an update on the discussion held while he was out, she repeated her conclusions and the request she had made to Dumbledore.

He understood her reasoning and added his own comments. When he was frozen, it had seemed only like if a few seconds had happened while, for the others, several minutes had passed. In that time, he had seen everything in fast motion, and had noticed that the Dementor's 'lips' were moving, as if speaking, although very slowly. Agreeing on the possible use of muggle tools, he proposed to use his own house.

"Severus, I can't allow you to put Dementors so near to muggles! Besides, it's too far for you to travel, especially with Miss Granger."

“Albus, I’m sorry, but, as you are not the Headmaster anymore, you can’t really disallow anything from me, now.”

The old man muttered, “I knew I was to regret my decision some day.”

Snape continued. “Besides, it wouldn’t be as if they were in contact with the muggles. You know that the house is magically expanded inside, and I can improve one of the centre rooms so that nobody will feel them from outside at all. And Miss Granger seems to hold herself quite well recently.”

Hermione reacted to the pique, falsely menacing to slap his arm. “Only recently? I’ll show you!”

When Dumbledore chuckled lightly, she calmed herself and blushed.

Becoming serious again, the aged Professor asked “Are you sure about that? Both of you?”

“Yes, Albus.”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Let’s move them, then.”

“Albus?” Severus was looking at his feet, but continued. “May I ask you something?”

Looking at his younger and suddenly shy colleague inquiringly, Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, you may.”

“Can you put the house under Fidelius? You know that the Death Eaters are looking for me. I’m sure Voldemort knows its location, as he... he...” he took a ragged breath. “I don’t want any of us to have problems.” he finished, looking intently towards Hermione.

Understanding the man’s reaction, Dumbledore nodded again. “I guess I’ll have to put you as Secret Keeper.”

Snape seemed to think for a few seconds, before shaking his head. "That would be too obvious."

"You know that I can't be the one, as I already have Grimmau... I mean, I have another location." Albus finished lamely, registering Hermione's presence.

They seemed to think for a while, and after a few more seconds, both turned slowly towards Hermione. Thanks to Harry, who had told her his parents' story, she knew what were the Fidelius charm and the Secret Keeper.

"What?"

Both men were smiling, looking at her intently. Both knew that she was perceptive enough to figure it out by herself. She did.

"ME? No way! You're insane, both of you. Sorry, but..."

Albus chuckled. "If that were true, would I know it?"

Snape looked at his colleague darkly, before turning towards her.

"You are the only one besides us knowing about the project."

"I'm not to be responsible for your house! I'm too young!"

Albus tried to interrupt. "There is no age limit, once the person is able to talk or write."

"What if... what if..." she seemed to be at a loss for words, before finding an opportunity. She turned to Snape. "What if you found a girlfriend? She'd have to ask me the location!"

He looked at her intently, his dark eyes inscrutable. "What will happen if I find a girlfriend will be my responsibility."

Ashamed to have quite invaded her Professor's private sphere, she blushed and quieted down. The three of them looked around uneasily, before she sighed, defeated.

“I'll do it. I'll be your Secret Keeper.”  
Northern London funfair...

Like every year, Easter holidays had arrived quickly, and the teens had been looking forward to it. However, for Gabriel and Joan, it had also meant that they would return to the fair, and they would have to manage memories of Grace and Joan's aggression there. The others had promised to come at some point, and Tamara had said to Gabriel, privately, that she would exchange some information with her elemental Counsellor before coming back. The old man had been guiding her morally like a priest would have, and she knew that his knowledge of the elements was more complete than hers. That way, she indicated, they would know more about his element and she would be able to train him.

Before the holidays, with Tamara, he had continued practising aikido and meditation, and it had helped to quicken his feline transformation, causing it to require less concentration, and making it less painful also. He could now transform into a lion and back in less than a few seconds. He had also, at one point, put the finger on the thing that was missing in his final form, but he couldn't even try to concentrate to obtain it, as he had never seen such a creature. The wings. The wings that he had drawn and that graced his torso.

At one point, frustrated about that, he had browsed his sketchpad in search of ideas, and had stumbled on his first picture of a phoenix, next to the big castle and a snake. If he could transform into a lion while concentrating on it really hard, perhaps he could also turn into a bird? Well, he had reflected, for this particular bird, it would be difficult, but he could try a bird more... common. His eye drifting on the picture, he had also remarked that the snake form would be interesting also. His mind in turmoil, he had closed the sketchpad and had gone to bed, exhausted.

Now that all three of them were in the fair, Gabriel had participated in keeping the stall, and he quickly realized that it wasn't the same job as managing a show like the ghost ride. There, he only had to sell tickets operate machinery, and playing the occasional ghost himself. Now, he had to yell, to attract the customer, and had to appear happy all the time. His first day was so exhausting that he could just manage going to the shower before stumbling into bed.

The following morning, he woke up at five, famished and his last dream still in his head. Upon discovering the time and the sleepy household, he decided to go outside and to leave for his hideaway. Once there, he started by eating a few fruits from his plate, and meditated to recover his dream and his actual memory linked to it.

It had been about Tamara.

And about his first 'furry' problem.

The first time he had had to change his appearance voluntarily, he had found himself with black arms, because he had inadvertently thought about her while changing. Now, he reflected, it would be interesting to change his face while staying human. Maintaining his meditation, he started to concentrate, thinking about a darker skin on his arms first. A few seconds of tingling afterwards, he knew that his arms had changed and he didn't even need to check it. He concentrated some more, and did the same to his face. He had to wait a dozen seconds for his face to stop prickling afterwards, but, when he got up and looked at his face in the bathroom, he was quite surprised to see the pitch-black face looking back at him. Surprised, but in a good sense, as it demonstrated his power over his body. Checking his watch and doing the customary adjustment, he decided to return on the bed to meditate some more, and to try more complicated changes. He also took the mirror in the bedroom to check the results without needing to get up.

The first change he tried was to get rid of his scars, even if he knew intimately that they were part of him. That done, he attempted to grow a left eye. He succeeded in that and was ecstatic for a few seconds, but, to his chagrin, the eye wasn't functional. He changed their colours, too, and, trying one after the other, decided that he liked

green very much. His last transformation attempt was about his muscles and bones, as he reflected that transforming into a lion would normally be more difficult than just changing the size of already-present organs. In this last effort, he achieved some muscle augmentation, and gained a few inches in size. Looking at his reflection, he didn't recognize himself anymore, and thought that, should he be pursued by nasty people, he could always take this form, and leave unscathed. Taking a long look at himself, he memorized his features, before turning back into himself. He tried to change between the two forms, and found it easier to do each time. Once in the black form the third time, he reflected about his lion form, and wondered if he could transform into it without reverting to his own self in between. Closing his eyes, he tried.

And felt something like a jolt in his whole body.

Of course, he had to start slowly again. He had tried to transform quickly, like he was used to, now, but his starting body wasn't the same now. Slowly again, and focused on the task at hand, he accomplished his transformation. Seeing through the feline's eyes made him long for a stereovision, and he decided that it would be his next step. However, once he turned back into himself, a quick glance at his watch told him that it was time to go back. He had spent more than eight hours in there, and it was time to return to the normal flow of time. After adjusting his watch, he used the ring again to travel back to the dark alcove he had come from.  
Southern London, in a well-kept house...

"Hey!"

"Watch out!"

"Move!"

"What the..."

"...hell?"

Aghast, the Granger parents looked in wonder at the pile of limbs that had emerged from the chimney and that was now struggling on the floor.

“That’s my foot, you dim-wit...”

“Fred!”

“...ted blisterous tadpole!”

“Georges!”

Hermione sighed, and, bending, helped the top-most coherent set of limbs to get up, relieving some pressure from the now-blue bottommost Weasley. That first set was one of the twins, and they worked together to extract the other redheads from the tangle on the floor. Ron was still out, though, but a quick spell and a glass of water afterwards, everything was fine.

The Grangers had returned the Christmas invitation and were now playing hosts to an armful of Weasleys, much to Hermione’s displeasure, as she wanted to study about the usual school subjects. Her research about Dementors was coming to a close, and it had monopolized most of her time and energy while at Hogwarts. But she liked it. Her parents however, wary of last summer crisis, had insisted that she take a day off to welcome the incoming family. In the week before their arrival, knowing that the Weasleys didn’t know the muggle world well, they had decided to split them. Molly Weasley would go shopping with Jane Granger in the morning, and they would go to the spa in the afternoon. Mark Granger, after discussing with Hermione, decided to take Arthur Weasley on a technology store for the morning. The current Minister of Magic couldn’t be freed from his demanding job more than a few hours, and he would go back alone before everyone.

Hermione would bring the four youngsters to some muggle places. She wanted to show them the places she liked herself, but, after having visited two otherwise interesting libraries and a museum,

Ginny asked her to go somewhere else while they were waiting for the Underground.

After looking at her for a thoughtful moment, Hermione took them to the last place where she would go herself...

...the funfair.

Hermione was an only child, and had studied all her life. The Weasley were seven children, and had been lively from the start. Even if Hermione didn't like the place, the four others had a blast visiting it, only needing a small introduction to the shows and games.

Ginny, though, even while amusing herself, found it difficult to concentrate, as the whole setting seemed to scream at forgotten memories. Looking at her, Ron sighed but didn't intervene, even if he knew what was happening. She had to do it herself, he reflected, before letting the topic drop.

After a stall with money machines, they passed near a show that particularly tugged at Ginny's mind, but it was closed, and half-dismounted anyway. Therefore, they followed the path until a sharp-shooting stall. As usual, Hermione explained the goal of it, and Fred and Georges went first, followed by Ginny and Ron at a lighter pace. Hermione herself wasn't participating to the games, although the Weasleys' antics made her smile quite often.

The man who gave the twins their rifles teased them about having to share one, and started another joke but stopped mid-sentence, looking forward. He was looking straight at Ginny.

A long pause ensued, interrupted by a kid asking for a refill in ammunition. When the man left, the twins tried the guns, but found them noisy and inaccurate. The man then silently served Ron and Ginny, and they didn't fare better than the twins, except that Ron, while missing his own target by a far shot, managed to hit Ginny's full centre. After the customary congratulations, she left the stall with what appeared to be a giant yellow stuffed squirrel.

The moment after they left, though, Gabriel arrived to help Michael. Even if he could hold his own, Michael didn't dare put him in charge of the guns when that many people were there. Nevertheless, he indicated the red-haired girl to him.

Noticing the red mane, the teen jumped off the stall and started to follow the group of redheads through the crowd. They were leaving, though, and he hadn't seen the girl's face, something he felt he had to do. After following the group for a few streets, he was still unable to see her, so he decided to bravely step up and talk to them. Before being able to do so, though, he felt himself grasped by the collar and dragged in a nearby alleyway.

"Well, well, well... Isn't it our little pain-in-the-rear back in town?"

He knew the voice. He knew the faces. And he had a good plan, even if it was going to start strangely. After first looking around to confirm that nobody else was there as well, he smirked. Knowing that he was going to make an impression, he muttered the activation word to leave for his Hideaway. Grasping the skull scarf there, he braced himself, and went back in the alley.

Once in the place, thanks to the thugs' momentary surprise about their prey's new disappearance, he jumped farther in the dark alley, and held the scarf in their full view.

"Whom does this belong to?"

The first moment of surprise passed, and the second moment, due to the showing of the scarf, passed as well, their uneasy stance was a clear indication of their guilt. Making use of their temporary silence, he spoke again.

"No need to search for excuses. I already thought about half the things you might say and none of them will appease my wrath."

That seemed to impress the underlings, but they weren't street thugs for nothing, and recovered rapidly. Gloating, their leader proclaimed

the scarf was his, and that he was going to continue his job sooner or later.

Hearing the hideous words, Gabriel couldn't hold his fury much longer than the necessary few seconds he needed to achieve a well-practised transformation. While doing it, though, he didn't notice the white-cloaked man standing farther in the street, looking straight at him. Once the transformation complete, Gabriel was pleased to see, with both eyes, the ruffians step back in fright. He could understand their reaction, though. One moment, a frail teenager was standing, and the next, a full-fledged lion was crouching, licking his cheeks.

He knew who the leader was. His new body was ready. Gabriel pushed on his muscles, and the crouching lion became a jumping one, landing squarely on the man's chest. The animal's weight combined with his velocity pushed the man on the ground, breaking a few ribs in the process. He didn't want to kill him, but rather treat him like he had treated Joan, by removing his privates, drawing as much blood as possible.

Satisfied that his prey was on the ground, he looked around menacingly. As the other would-be thugs didn't move, he opened his maw, and a loud roar escaped his throat. Terrified, the three men thugs dropped their knives and ran out of the premises.

But Gabriel had made a mistake.

The leader was still alive, and armed. When he was frightening the underlings, the man, in a desperate attempt to save his life, took his knife out, and tried to plunge it in the lion's heart. But the starting movement caught Gabriel's eye, and he jumped forward to avoid it. The blade plunged in his left rear paw and stayed imbedded there.

Roaring in pain, and blinded by fury, he turned around and lunged forward, as he had intended. His jaws took hold of the man's midsection, and he shook it violently. The man screamed in pain, and, realizing what was happening, his voice raised an octave or two. Unfortunately for him, that musical leap would be permanent. His job done, Gabriel withdrew slowly towards the deep end of the alley. He didn't want people from outside coming to check on the scene. The

thug leader grasped his mutilated and bleeding groin, and ran awkwardly out of the alley. The persons who replaced him, though, were the last ones Gabriel awaited there.

Unfortunately for Johnny, he met a few Bobbies on his way to the hospital, and they recognized him as the leader of the ever-elusive thugs terrorizing the neighbourhood. Even if he was healed a short time later, it was in a prison hospital, thus with the minimum comfort and certainly no organ reconstruction. Afterwards, he spent a long time experiencing the infamous prison showers treatment. Fate may be a bitch, but she sometimes gives some people exactly what they deserve.

Nearby, a short while earlier...

The five teenagers were on their way to the nearest underground station, when Ron noticed the old man clad in white standing on the opposite side of the street. And stopped. Abruptly. So brusquely that Ginny, who was following quietly, still lost in her failing memories, bumped on him.

“Hey!”

The interjection called for the others' attention, and they soon looked at Ron inquiringly. He was looking straight towards a man, who wasn't even looking in their direction. The man was staring towards the entrance of a dark alleyway a few yards away. Turning slowly on himself, Ron glanced there as well. The others looked alternatively between Ron, the man, and the alley. Just as they started to ask questions, they heard a roar coming from the alley. Georges and Hermione, who had been looking towards the man, saw him smile, flashing a glance in their direction, and disappear. Ron stepped towards the alley, and Ginny... blanched.

Having identified the nature of the roar, she took hold of Ron's shoulder, but he shrugged her off, just as three nasty-looking although frightened men escaped the alley, running as if their life depended on it. Which it most certainly did. The roar that followed didn't have the same tone, and this time, Ginny didn't restrain Ron, as she pressed him forward instead. When they arrived in the alley, they

saw a man clutching his bleeding groin and wobbling towards the Underground station. And a retreating lion.

Once Ginny arrived in plain sight, though, the lion stopped moving, looking at her. And she at him. Thinking that it was an intimidation manoeuvre from the lion, Fred and Georges, after looking around, got their wands out, and tried to advance towards the animal, before Ron stopped them. Hermione tried to scold him, but Ron was oblivious. He just muttered something that they had to bend towards him to hear.

“Don’t you see? It’s him. We finally found him.”

His meaning was lost to them. And Ginny didn’t hear either. She advanced a bit, unsteadily, and the lion didn’t move, following her with his eyes. His green eyes.

Not even looking around to check about nearby muggles, she went on all fours, and started her own transformation.

Hermione and the twins were shocked, to say the least, while Ron was smiling widely. Looking between the feline form of Ginny and the smiling Ron, Hermione understood finally that Ron had known this for a long time. Her ex-friend was far, very far from being dim-witted, although it was too late to renew a real friendship. A glimmer of respect came to her eyes, though, and she promised herself to take into account what he would say in the future. Well, she reflected, she would try.

The twins were only thinking about the endless possibilities offered by an animagus form. They knew that their role-models, the Marauders, had been, and decided on the spot to try to do that also.

Ginny was oblivious to the mere humans behind her. In front of her stood the one she had been waiting for, all her life. She knew it was Harry Potter, even if the other lion’s eyes seemed glazed. He recognized her as his own, but couldn’t place her, as his memories were still fuzzy. His heart, though, knew the lioness for what she was, and bounced happily, menacing to break through his ribs. The acceleration of his blood flow brought two things to him. He suddenly

felt light-headed. And he felt a tingling on his back. The famous tingle was back! And this time, he let his unconscious do the work, waiting for the final result which he already knew.

The lioness stopped advancing.

Of the four humans nearby, three gasped.

There, in the middle of a somewhat shoddy and abandoned alleyway of London, beside a set of trashcans and a lying bicycle, proudly stood the animal that was the emblem of their House.

A golden griffin. A winged lion.

It started to move towards the lioness, although his rear paw still had a knife in it. The regal animal looked at his hind leg in annoyance, shook it to eject the weapon, and continued to advance. The lioness saw him arriving with wonder in her feline eyes. Somewhere deep inside, she knew him, and trusted him. She advanced also.

The others could only look at the scene in wonder, while Ron glanced at it with a knowing smile, which quickly turned into a frown. Noticing this, Hermione asked him.

“What?”

“Stop. Stop him. Stop them.”

“We can’t stop him, Ron, it’s a lion! A winged one! And she’s a lion too.”

He ignored her, and started to walk towards the two beasts, only to be caught by Fred and George.

“Don’t fret, young brother, we don’t want you maimed. These are wicked beasts.”

“You don’t understand? It’s him! Him! They have to stop, or they...”

As if the time had been decided beforehand, both lions chose that moment to lick each other's face.

Thunder suddenly filled the area, as something like lightning bolts erupted from the lions' place. The nearby trashcans melted on the spot, and the bike's tires blew up. The nearest windows exploded, and the four teenagers were deafened and blinded on the spot.

To be continued in next chapter: Conflicts...

If you want to know quickly  
What happened to them, really.  
Dementors may hide your view,  
There is something here; review.

## Chapter 22 – Conflicts

The teenagers rose from their crouched position. The dust had just settled, and there were some surprised shouts in the main road. The young wizards blinked for a few moments, trying to remove the dark spots in their vision. As soon as they recovered their senses, the four of them launched themselves forwards, to the prone form of a red lioness they knew to be Ginny. There was only one animal there, the golden griffin had disappeared.

Fred and George, being the only ones with a wand, tried to wake her with the usual spells, but failed. Hermione suggested one or two spells they could use too, but to no avail. Finally, they decided to get help from a full-grown wizard, who could at least Apparate there and help them. As Ron, who seemed to have known the golden griffin, was now as mute as before, they also wanted to find its identity.

“We could ask dad...” started Fred.

“...he’ll sure come with a full squad.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Do you really think that he wouldn’t overreact upon seeing his daughter in that state? Besides, he’s rather occupied nowadays, now is he not?” She turned back to the prone lioness, stroking her head. “I propose we ask professor Snape.”

They could only gape at her, stunned, before recovering after a few seconds. After all, their capacity of recovering from any surprise was legendary. Their stunned look, however, was replaced by disappointment at seeing their less-than-preferred teacher, as well as fright at what he might do. They didn’t know about the research headed by Hermione and him, and almost nobody knew. Ron, though, looking at her in his usual dreamy expression, tried to calm them.

“He’s trustworthy.” he said.

Fred snorted. “How do you know, Ron? Unless you changed your mind...”

“...you do remember how he treated you, don’t you?” finished George.

Hermione interrupted them. “He has changed his mind, you prats! Now, do we want external help or not?”

“I don’t know...”

“...we could ask Dumbledore?”

She looked at them pointedly. “I happen to know that he’s visiting his brother during the holidays.”

“McGonagall?”

“Spends some holidays in Scottish highlands.”

“Okay, then...”

“...You win.”

“Lend me your wand, then,” she asked, “I didn’t take mine.”

She took a notepad from her pocket, ignoring the now amused smiles of the twins. The small notepad was already covered in numerous notes and diagrams, proof of her constantly ongoing research. After looking around, she wrote a few words on a blank page and ripped it off. Taking Fred’s proffered wand, she put it to her head then moved it in a round way around the page, while muttering chosen words. The page shimmered briefly, before disappearing. Giving the wand back to the gawking again twins, she kneeled next to Ginny, trying to guess her health. The animal was breathing, slowly and regularly, although it wasn’t reacting to the usual awakening spells.

A minute afterwards, a certain Potion Master could be seen apparating straight under the nearest porch, the coordinates of which he had just received from Hermione in a secure way. He looked around quickly, trying to assess the situation. His first reaction, on

seeing the three Weasley, was one of annoyance, but his eyes opened wide on discovering Hermione next to the sleeping feline.

His reaction was to run there to remove Hermione from the dangerous beast, but Ron spoke first "It's Ginny."

Glancing at him, and blinking for a second, he looked then at the prone animal and understood. After all, if what he knew was accurate, that colour of fur wasn't really common for such beasts. Still, seeing that Ginny Weasley, of the infamous Weasley family, had pulled the feat of becoming an animagus while being a student...

His eyes rested on the twins who, their backs to him, were chatting to themselves, stealing awed glances toward their sister. Awed, and also curious, calculating, and mischievous. It filled the Potion Master with an uneasy feeling, making him remember his time as a student. Shaking himself, he nodded to Ron, and, ignoring Fred and George, approached Hermione. "Why did you need me? You know I can trust you for the situation to actually be urgent when you write it is."

"We can't wake her up, and she needs to either change back, or be transported elsewhere. Muggles can come anytime."

"True. Muggle means?"

"Check."

"Usual spells?"

"Check."

The twins were flabbergasted at the efficiency of the exchange. It was as if the two kneeling persons already worked together on a daily basis. Unbeknownst to them, it was actually the case. Wanting to help, as it was their sister on the ground, they approached Hermione and Snape.

"Can we do something?"

The Potion Master sneered, and started “Are you actually able to...”

But Hermione smoothly interrupted him, addressing the twins. “Go in the alley entrance and prevent muggles from entering. Clean some of this mess, too.”

Once they left, to cast a few notice-me-not spells in the alley entrance to fend off the now approaching Muggles, Hermione added, for Snape. “I don’t want to start an argument here. But it’s true they are better off our feet.”

He nodded. “What happened?”

When she gave him a short version of it, he could only look at the prone animal in wonder.

“If I didn’t have the proof here that Miss Weasley is an animagus, I’d say it’s unbelievable... Still, I remember an episode where such a lion saved a group of people in the Forbidden Forest, and Albus seemed to know something. As for the golden griffin... If it was anyone else than you telling the event, I might have accused them of lying. Such beast was belonging to the myths.”

“There is something else.”

“What?”

“Ron kept saying it was ‘him’ but he didn’t explain who he was talking about. I have my idea about it, though. Do you know a spell to inspect ownership of magical residues?” Encompassing the damaged area with her arm, she elaborated. “There has been quite a happenstance here.”

Nodding, he complied, and started to chant the appropriate incantation, while moving his wand in wider and wider circles, like a radar beam. When he stopped moving, three luminescent forms were floating a few feet from the ground. As he was proficient with the spell, Snape recognized that two of them had the characteristic shape of animagus transformations. These two had a humanoid shape, with

distinct limbs and head, but they couldn't give their owner away. On top of that, they were also of exactly the same colour, as if it had been the same wizard or witch doing the transformation twice.

The third shape, though, was relative to item activation, but the creator of it could be identified if the caster knew of that person's aura. Snape looked at the swirling colours closely, before recoiling in shock.

"No! It's not possible! He's dead!"

Hermione had understood that it was the magical residues she had asked about, but couldn't make heads or tails from them. She went to ask her mentor about it, when he turned towards her, his eyes wide.

"I know this signature, because I... I met it often in the past. It's James Potter's."

When a shaken Severus Snape arrived in his office, he went directly to the liquor cabinet and served himself a good dose of Beefeater, which he downed in one go, before sitting down. He then threw a pinch of Floo powder in the chimney, and asked for Albus Dumbledore. When the usually cheerful face of his oldest colleague appeared, it immediately turned into a concerned frown.

"What happened, Severus? You seem to have seen a ghost."

Snape snorted at the old man's attempt at humour, before sighing. "Actually, I just missed one."

The elder looked at him thoughtfully, before speaking again. "Care to elaborate?"

"I got called to solve a problem regarding four students in London. Five, in fact." He looked at the old man in the eye. "But the fifth was in a lion form."

"Ah."

"Ah? That's all?"

“No, Severus. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to intrude in your quarters. My feeling is that the connection is not secure, and I don’t want to speak about it in that way. Let me say my farewells and I’ll be right there.”

A few minutes, and another downed gin, later, the flames flared again, this time to let the old wizard through. Snape wasn’t in a state where he would have exaggerated his greetings.

“Albus, you could have told us about her!”

The old man sniffed the air suspiciously, but kept quiet his discovery of the white bottle on the table nearby. “Would it have changed anything, Severus? Wouldn’t it make you remember your old days? Wouldn’t you have tried to prevent me to do so, even if it was already in her?”

“Already? What do you mean?”

“She came to me, once, with deformed limbs. I had no choice but speed her learning so that she could revert quickly. Besides, it seems that it had been helpful for several students as well.”

“It wasn’t planned! And, if you recall correctly, I went strongly against the outing all the same.”

“I remember, I remember. But surely, young Miss Weasley’s new shape is not what motivated this call, is it?”

Snape shuddered. “You’re right, it’s not.” He sighed, and looking up his old mentor with suddenly lost eyes, he spoke again.

“Today, I encountered a magical signature I didn’t think I would see again. Not soon, and not ever.”

“May I ask whose?”

“Potter’s.” After a stretching silence, he added “James.”

Dumbledore was looking at him, his eyes still twinkling despite the seriousness of his expression. Slowly at first, then with a more fluent speech, Snape began to tell him about his family, his schooling, his lack of true friends, and his nemesis. Dumbledore knew about all this, of course, but it was cathartic for the Potion Master to open up like this, even if it had been helped by strange circumstances and several shots of alcohol. He even laid out the reasons for his visceral hate of Harry, reasons which had been shot down in the previous summer when he had learnt that the young boy hadn't been pampered at all, and everything that resembled his father in him was his looks. And his capacity to attract trouble, too, to be fair.

After this, he recounted his trip in muggle London where he had found an unconscious lioness and an unbelievable story where a winged lion had been witnessed. Dumbledore believed his Potion Master, in general. He also believed Hermione Granger. But he knew for a fact that human senses could be tricked and that it certainly wasn't a winged lion in front of the stunned teenagers. The unconscious lion was posing a problem, of course, and he promised to take care of it.

After he had put his old friend to sleep, Albus Dumbledore went to his quarters, thinking along the way while humming an old tune. Once in his office, he gathered a few vials of potions and Apparated just outside of the Burrow. He thought it was bad form to enter in peoples' house unannounced.

It wasn't quite the good idea, though, as it was raining, and several moments passed before Hermione answered the door. To her remark about the possible use of a weather charm, he shrugged, answering that he thought he was going to enter quickly. A wet Albus Dumbledore entered the pristine living room, but nobody paid attention to it, as everybody was yelling around a sleeping lioness. The yelling explained the lack of response from the door, but he also understood that it wasn't helping in the least. He drew his wand.

“Silencio.”

In the calmness that ensued, the lion stirred in contentment and rolled over, knocking a low table and a brother on the way. While George

was finding his footing again, cursing silently against the laying feline, Dumbledore cast a spell on Ginny to evaluate her state. To his relief, she was okay, only asleep, although so deeply that usual waking spells weren't working. He knew that it wasn't a good idea to wake someone so deep in sleep like that, but he could still do something to help the distraught Weasleys. Remembering an obscure spell, obscure because of its rarity of use due to the rarity of animagi in the world, he trained his wand on Ginny again, and cast it.

“Reverto Animagi.”

To everyone's awed gaze, the girl slowly turned from a large lion into her usual frame. Dumbledore then levitated her into the couch, and dropped a blanket on her. He then pointed to the kitchen's door, and they all piled there. After removing the silence charm, he raised his hand and spoke first.

“I'm sorry, Molly, because of not warning you about her being an animagus. She has been real quick in mastering the transformation, and we didn't have the time to speak about it.” He turned towards the teens. “Severus told me about your encounter with another lion?”

On cue, the twins launched in a wild description of the opposing beast. In their eyes, it now had four wings and it was towering ten feet over them, with impossibly green eyes casting lightning bolts all over the place. Rolling her eyes, Hermione corrected them, but the damage had been done, as Dumbledore seemed to believe that they had been tricked in seeing something more than a winged lion. She couldn't logically refute the point, so, after looking toward an oblivious Ron for help, she sighed and let it drop.

Molly Weasley looked tired. Very tired. More than if she just witnessed her daughter coming back in a leonine form. Thinking about it, Albus Dumbledore wondered if there was anything else.

“Molly?”

“Yes Albus?” she sniffed.

“Is there anything else?”

She went silent for a while, looking at her children reluctantly. Taking her mood in, Hermione left the room, tugging Fred and George behind her with some questions about their new pranks. Smiling at the twins' antics, the two adults turned toward Ron, but he was already going for the door. On the threshold, though, he turned toward Dumbledore, and looked him in the eye.

“I know you don't believe us. I don't blame you. You'll see reason soon.”

Before the startled pair could react, he had passed the door and closed it gently. Returning to the woman, he was startled to find her openly crying in her handkerchief. He took her against him and she sobbed on his shoulder while he conjured a strong tea with the accompanying lemon drops. She saw that, and chuckled in her tears.

Finally, recovering herself, she took an envelope from her dress and gave it to him with trembling hands. She then took the proffered cup, and sipped on it while looking at the gloomy weather outside. Understanding what he had to do, Dumbledore opened the letter and read it. The old man was gasping when he reached the end.

Gringotts Egypt Branch, Cairo

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,

On December 15th we asked your son William Weasley to participate in a research team in the depth of the Great Desert. He went with a group of wizards and witches, each specialized in his or her own field. Needless to say, William's talent in breaking curses put him in the first place for this important mission. The group had to travel secretly to the starting point and undertake the mission in the same state. That's why he couldn't come back for Christmas.

They weren't going to be able to owl anyone, being underground, and unfortunately, that's also why we didn't send a rescue mission until

one months ago. All these people were very proficient specialists, and very able to survive in the harshest conditions.

We found the main corridor of the site collapsed. Now again, even this could have been managed by the team. We had to excavate slowly and carefully because of the nature of the ground, though, and we have only recently arrived, in the first chamber of the site.

Your son wasn't there. But every other member of the team was there, dead. I can't write in which state they were found in, and I want to forget I ever witnessed it. However, after sending them to their last homes, we conducted an intensive search of the premises. We didn't find William at all.

Mr. and Mrs Weasley, I'm sorry to write this rather than say it to you personally. Your son has been declared missing, from the date of the start of this mission onward. We couldn't prevent the local authorities to also launch an international search warrant for him, too. I hope that this message will find you before the press gets wind of this. Of course, you understand the uncomfortable situation we all are in, and if William would show up, I'm sure we will keep each other informed.

With all my sympathy,

Gonnrack, manager  
In a remote bedroom...

He turned around in his bed, stirring before awakening from his numerous pleasant dreams. He couldn't remember them, though, and experienced a feeling of loss about that. He could also feel some blood on his lips, and that raised some uncomfortable questions. His bed, though, wasn't used to his bulk moving in it, and protested with all its furniture voice. He raised his arms and yawned widely, before bending to lick an itch in his hind paw.

What?

The result of suddenly becoming aware of his animal form made him jump. However, as he was curled on himself, the jump became a scramble as he fell off the bed.

While trying to recover his footing, he shook himself, and felt whole, with his added appendages. Perplexed, he turned his head and noticed the large feathery wings attached on his back. He moved them a little, and noticed their weightlessness. One of these days, he thought, he'll have to try them. Concentrating on his real form, he quickly recovered it. Two legs, two arms, no wings anymore, and one eye only.

He tried to remember what had caused his transformation and his presence in his rooms, and staggered. He had found her! He had found her and something had happened! But he had fallen unconscious, and his ring had obediently brought him back to his hideaway. Glancing at his watch, he was surprised and a little disturbed that a whole day had passed. Joan and Michael would be upset, even if in the real world, only eight hours would have passed.

Trying to remember his dreams through his meditation exercises, he discovered that they were stored in the hidden part of his memory, as everything that was related to his past. He also found out something else: instead of the usual three dark shapes blocking his memories, there were only two now. He didn't understand the meaning of it, though, and decided to come back. Standing up, he braced himself and used the ring to come back to the last place he was.

The alley was empty.

And seemed as if it had been cleaned, as even the trashcans weren't there anymore.

He suddenly thought that, if he had mastered a dog-like form, he could have followed their scent. He tried to concentrate to that effect, but, due to his distress, his lack of knowledge about dogs, and the urgency of the situation, he failed completely.

Crying at the lost opportunity, he sat there for a while. It wasn't until dusk had settled that he left the place, heading back to the Freyrs' trailer.

Hogwarts, a week after spring break...

The start of the last school term was subdued. The weather wasn't friendly, as downpours plagued the countryside, and people mostly stayed inside. The last Ingredient Gathering of the year was reported sine die, and even Quidditch activity was almost null.

In Gryffindor common room, Ginny Weasley was in front of her homework without registering it. She was reflecting about the main event which had occurred during the holidays. It had taken her a whole day to wake from her slumber afterwards, and, once awake, she had changed back to her human form. After that, she had had to explain what had happened to her family, despite having only fuzzy memories of the whole event. She could only remember that someone was there, someone that she longed after, without registering his identity. She had been equally surprised to hear the twins' recollection of the winged lion. And now, in the red and golden common room surrounded by pictures of Gryffindor's crest, her heart was bleeding again upon his disappearance.

More privately, her twin menace of older brothers had wanted to know how and when she had become an animagus, something she couldn't help them with, to their utter disappointment. She had only promised to ask the person who had helped her to contact them if he agreed to help them too.

In the quiet atmosphere of the school, only one group of students were somewhat happy, as they weren't forced to go outside and had free periods, initially reserved to more outgoing activity, to practise their preferred activity: study. The students of Ravenclaw, as well as some bookworms from other Houses, were scattered everywhere in the Library, to the point of not having a table available most of the day. In the studious hive, one person was missing. They had all thought, before dismissing the idea because of their studying, that Hermione Granger would be there as well.

But she wasn't in the Library. She wasn't even in the castle. She was with Severus Snape, in his home. And they were happy. To some extent.

They had found a way to communicate with the damned creatures!

At first, they had modified the potion which would slow the drinker's perception, and had used muggle devices which were able to lower the frequency of given sounds. None of them were really knowledgeable in that particular Muggle field, but, using a small bit of magic and a great deal of gold, they got someone to install a device working the way they wanted it. Snape had Obliviated the muggle afterwards, though not without giving him a hefty sum.

The experimentation took a whole week, during which the second Dementor was studied at Hogwarts in the practical Defence course. The goal was to train the students of every year on bringing in a corporeal Patronus, even if most of the successful students came from the upper years. Nevertheless, the training worked. After all, if what they imagined was true, Voldemort would be soon ready to launch Dementors on the world, and they better be prepared.

Hermione and Snape succeeded in exchanging a few words with the remaining soul-sucker, and the results had been most strange.

"Uuuuuneeeeeaaase..."

"Why?"

"No one... talking to... Cohort... anymore."

"Who is Cohort?"

"We... are."

"Is Cohort your name?"

"Cohort... name of... Cohort."

The short exchange had needed a full day under the potion, and Severus, who was still refusing that Hermione drink it because of the strain, was exhausted. From the few words that he reported before falling asleep, they got the impression of speaking to a group of several persons, rather than an entity. The feeling was strange, and they would need more sessions to go further. The following day, though, was as cryptic as the first.

“What do you like?”

“Cohort... liking... orders.”

“How to give orders to Cohort?”

“Speaking... them.”

“Any other mean?”

“Cohort... obey.”

It seemed that the creature was obeying anyone able to speak to it. It seemed bizarre that no verification was necessary, but, reflecting on this, they remarked that people confronted to the damned creatures preferred to flee them rather than speaking with them. Hermione and Snape were a little afraid, though, that Voldemort could uncover that information. The third day, they tried another line of thoughts and inquired about the creatures' social behaviour.

“Do you have a hierarchy? A commander?”

“We... are... one. Commander... missing.”

“Who is your commander?”

“Whoever... takes... commanding... helm.”

“Where is the commanding helm?”

“Our... home... deep... down.”

When Snape woke up from his frozen state after the short exchange, he was too excited to go to sleep right away, and he asked Hermione to summon Dumbledore while he took a peppering potion. The old man had already been informed about the house location, and he arrived promptly. Snape then proceeded to relate his few conversations with the Dementor, during which Hermione was thoughtful. They then shared their ideas with Dumbledore.

The first was that, because of the peculiar wording of the creature's sentences, it could be possible that every living Dementor was mentally linked to the others. It opened several avenues of thoughts, like allowing them to order the whole bunch of them with only one present. As anyone can guess, as much as it was interesting, it was a distressing idea when you thought that Voldemort was conducting the same research.

The second idea was about the aforementioned commanding helm. They didn't know what it was, but suspected that it could enable faster discussion and orders to the Dementor pack. Chatting with them and giving them orders by merely talking with them was fine, but it would take a whole day to express a mere attacking order. The helm would certainly make battle reactions faster and more accurate. The location of the helm itself was unknown, but the three of them suspected it to be in the deeper dungeons of Azkaban, as no other building could be called 'home' by Dementors.

Dumbledore agreed to the idea of mounting an expedition there to try to uncover it, while rejecting Hermione's participation to it. Experimenting with the Dementor had already taken its toll on the girl, and he didn't want to put her in the duress of such a trip. They also discussed about the orders that they could give to the Dementors through the one present, and agreed to protect Hogwarts first.

Despite having drunk a whole vial of peppering up potion, Snape had had energy only for the discussion, and needed his sleep. Therefore, after being explained the working of the devices by Hermione, Dumbledore took the interrogation over. His interrogation style was

different than Snape's, as he was mainly searching confirmation of their theories.

“Is your ‘home’ called Azkaban by us Wizards?”

“Yes.”

“What are the protections around the commanding helm?”

“Illusions.”

“Will all Dementor obey if I give you an order?”

“Yes.”

“I order you not to attack Hogwarts, ever.”

“Cohort... can't... obey... this.”

“Why?”

“Already... ordered... to attack... and disregard... all orders... to prevent... that.”

Azkaban...

In the wizarding prison, there had been chaos before. Most often than not, it was because of a new batch of troublesome prisoners. The rest of the time, it was a ruckus caused by some guardian tired of hearing the Dementors constantly. These problems had always been solved swiftly, as the prisoners quickly fell under the Dementors' effect, and the tired guardian was removed. There were almost no human guardians nowadays, as Fudge had preferred to keep the necessary money for other activities, more oriented towards his own person.

Since he had taken the Minister position, Arthur Weasley had been drowned under the laws he had to repel, and hadn't stumbled upon the prison's case yet. Therefore, it was only with a token resistance

that the dozen guards tried to prevent the Dementors to escape en masse, that night. All but a few of them were Kissed, and the few survivors got cursed by the Death Eaters who had approached the island on a dozen skiffs. The damned creatures mounted the frail boats and left the island, while some Death Eaters entered the prison and freed those who were sane enough to come back to their master quickly and efficiently. They had thought of keeping one skiff to head back, but in front of the sheer number of Dementors, they had to bring back the whole 'fleet' to bring all of them on the shore. Once all dark creatures had regrouped there, they left towards their target, and the Death Eaters left for their master's house. Voldemort's remote cottage...

Next to the potion laboratory that had been installed to satisfy Anekka Krenstarck, a room split by bars contained a Dementor on one side, a table and two chairs on the other. On the chairs nearest to the soul-sucking creature, the Potion Mistress was sitting. She had had her wand trained on the Dementor and lowered it, shaking. She took a potion from the table and drank it to the last drop. Once done, she managed a little smile on her ashen features, and talked.

"T'is done, my Lord."

On the other chair, Lord Voldemort was so happy that he could cast a wandless Patronus right now, if he had thought about it. They had discovered the community of mind of the Dementors, and he had set his female associate on the task of ordering them to attack Hogwarts. She had visibly been through hell to accomplish that, going into the creature's mind and encountering countless horrors there. Nevertheless, she had also been clever enough to lock the attack order against any counter order.

Because of their nature, the creatures couldn't Apparate or use a portkey, so they were walking towards the target. His favourite curse breaker, though, unhindered by this lack of mobility, was already on the site, hidden in the forest with two guards. In a few days, Hogwarts would fall, and the world will be at his feet.

With a smile on Crouch's possessed face, Voldemort rose from his seat and nodded to the exhausted Potion Mistress, before leaving. He had still much to do. He went directly to his personal library, containing several important tomes, some of which he acquired through not-so-legal means. At the table, surrounded by books, were seated some Death Eaters. One of them, appearing tired, was always going from one to another, taking notes. Upon hearing his name, though, he stopped and went to his master.

"Any news, Jugson?"

"My Lord, we are browsing the books, and we'll find shortly."

"It is too bad that you haven't found it yet, Jugson. You'll continue to research into this, and you'll eat your meals here. In the meantime, we will take Hogwarts. Once this is done, and when I'll be freed of this mortal shell, my true reign will begin."

Voldemort shrilled his usual laugh, and left the study room. It wasn't until a long time had passed that the people there got their nerves back enough to work.

Northern London...

For the last months of school, Gabriel had decided to settle on a weekly routine. His first change from the previous term had been to take the fencing class after the riding one, after making sure that Joan was with Tamara in the relaxation class. The fencing class left him with bruises each time, but he had felt that he could use a sport more exhausting physically than horse riding, and that one had had places available. Even though he was tired to the point of sleeping after each session, he enjoyed them very much.

He had also documented himself on several creatures, borrowing several books from the school library about animals in general. And every free time that he had in school without his group of friends was spent in his hideaway, which he often accessed from the always-deserted school roof. Once in the isolated rooms, he tried to transform into these creatures, one after the other. After all, now that

he knew how to transform, everything went smoother. His other task was learning how to fly with the wings he had discovered during the vacation, but, being stranded to a small room, that was awkward at best.

The first animal he transformed successfully into was a dog, and then he immediately went to the alleyway where he had found the lioness to try to pick a trail. This was to no avail, though, as the scent had been erased by the multiple rains that had occurred in the meantime.

Sad, but continuing his personal work, he tried to transform into something smaller and that could conceal itself easily. At first, he imagined a snake, and it was on his mind for a good time afterwards. However, he also wanted to learn to fly, and a small bird, or an insect, would be preferable in that regard. A few days of trying later, he succeeded in transforming into a sparrow, either from his human form and back, or from his winged lion form and back. On the last minutes of his spare time that day, and tried to fly a little, but found it really difficult as he had to constantly move muscles that he hadn't been aware of until now.

Nevertheless, he was quite happy about his recent successes, and thus didn't take his usual precautions when coming back from his hideaway that last time. Whistling, he turned around the school heating exhaust behind which he had disappeared, before stopping in shock, his jaw hanging.

There, in front of him, and looking straight at him, were his usual enemies in the school. Until now, nothing untoward had been done directly against him or his friends, but bad jokes and item disappearance had occurred fairly often. Now, however, the jocks looked enraged, appeared quite stoned, and, listening to their ranting, he quickly discovered why.

Apparently, they had all failed one exam or another. To him, it didn't matter that they had wanted to become college athletes, so he tuned that part out. After that failure, they had gone on the roof thinking that they'd be alone to smoke god-knows-what, and he had irrupted through the stairway. Thinking that he was there to mock them, they had discreetly followed him until he went behind the exhaust, and

disappeared. They hadn't known what had happened, and had fetched the nearest 'freak' friend of his to ask for explanations.

Until that point in their halting explanation, he had noticed that they were grouped menacingly between him and the only exit through the stairs, and that they were hiding something. When they told him about fetching a friend, he had thought that they were still searching, but when they spread around the immobile black form on the concrete roof, his breath caught in his throat.

Even if Tamara was strong and liked sports, her age couldn't allow her to defend herself properly when roughly manhandled by a group of young adults. She was lying on the roof, one of her eyes swollen and her lip split. Her clothes were in disarray, showing body parts that usually went hidden, and Gabriel got the feeling that, hadn't he appeared right now, she would have passed an ugly moment. He didn't feel like a saviour, though. She was there because of him, of his recklessness. Had he looked around when he had entered the roof, she wouldn't be there.

Angry against himself, and against the jocks for treating her like that, he advanced towards her, intent on actually rescuing her. His path was suddenly blocked by one of the older teens, one chubby dark-haired young man, but he simply shoved him aside. The action wasn't missed by the wide-eyed others, though, as one would have to use a great deal of strength to push their overweight friend like this.

While Gabriel knelt near Tamara, shaking her gently, the jocks discussed between themselves quickly, animatedly, although quietly.

When Gabriel took Tamara's hand in his to prop her against the railing, they had come to a conclusion.

When Gabriel, taking note of Tamara waking up, raised her so that she leaned on him, their hands still entwined, the jocks acted on their conclusion. They ran to the duo, grabbed them, and, not waiting for a reaction, flung them over the railing. Their intent was to simulate a double suicide, so they quickly scribbled a note and left the roof running, without even looking at the tossed pair.

Falling, Gabriel's first thought was to transport to his hideaway. However, he rarely did that with onlookers around, so he lost precious milliseconds not knowing what to do. His unconscious mind, though, reacted quickly to the threat of falling, and he felt a tingle in his whole body, especially in his back. At the last possible moment, he took into account Tamara and their joined hands, making her touch the ring. Not registering the possible witnesses, he uttered the saving word.

“Safehaven.”  
Hogwarts...

The man was sweating. The news from his master had unnerved his guards, and they had prodded him to work faster, providing energizing potions when needed. The two Death Eaters also had work to do, as it was essential that they weren't discovered. So far, they had successfully disguised their magical signature as if they were Centaurs. By using a few potions, they had been living in the forest without hindrance.

The Dementors weren't ones to need rest, though, and they had been moving as fast as wild horses through the countryside, ignoring otherwise tantalizing wizarding or muggle settlements. The attack was going to take place much sooner than predicted, and Bill had to work fast. He worked overnight, and was still at it on the morning.

For the umpteenth time of the hour, he tried to think about how to protect the school, before holding his head in pain again. Any thought that wasn't relative to his imposed work was painful, and the pain was always increasing. Despite this, he briefly cursed his new master and the Potion Mistress who had devised such a mean to ensure obedience without even using the Imperius curse. In its wicked way, the potion was a mix between the two non-lethal Unforgivables.

He groaned imperceptibly, before going back to his work on the shield. The magical construct was old, and had been patched multiple times. He had been even able to notice some areas where it wasn't effective at all, even if these areas were located in the air. They had also been too small to allow anything larger than a bird to pass

through. However, starting on these, he had started to expand the holes towards the ground steadily. If everything went according to the schedule, there would be a ground-level breach on the ward when his master's new pawns would arrive. The first breach he had been assigned to open was behind the castle, on its north side, where nobody ever went and classes weren't held, so he was in little risk of discovery by its inhabitants. Even if he had been in plain sight, though, the invisibility dome created by one of his guards was enough for them not to be noticed.

While he reluctantly worked on the wards, Bill didn't notice the redhead in the distance, staring in his direction through a window from one of the old, dusty, and never-used classrooms.

After a few minutes of looking in the forest sadly, Ron left the classroom. That day, everyone willing to look at him would notice the miserable look. Nobody was willing, though. Even Ginny was still in her bizarre state, and Hermione wasn't to be seen anywhere.

The day's taut atmosphere was also reinforced when some classes were cancelled, without prior notice. One moment, students were waiting for a teacher in the usual classroom, and the next, another teacher, or even Filch, came by and shooed them in their common rooms. The missing teachers weren't even to be seen in the castle, and at lunch, half the staff table was empty and the students' rumour mill was running out of possible ideas for their disappearance. Marcus Flint, a seventh year Slytherin, even suggested that the Chamber of Secrets had been opened again. Of course, he didn't say it discreetly, no. He told it while walking right behind Ginny Weasley. The callous remark didn't fare well with her, and she marched up to him and slapped him, before leaving the Great Hall, tears streaking her face.

However, said teachers hadn't left the castle at all. They were all in McGonagall's office, with other people who seldom showed themselves in the school at all. There were most of Hogsmeade shops' tenants there, curious about why they had been asked to evacuate the village in the school. Madam Rosmerta, who owned of the pub 'The Three Broomsticks' was there, as well as the tenants of Zonko's, Honeyduke's, Gladrag's and Dervish & Banges. They were seated together and spoke in hushed tones.

Next to them was a large group of Aurors, some of them nervous while others looked at ease. Looking at the ease with which the famous Kingsley Shacklebolt went along with Albus Dumbledore, the younger Aurors, who had been sent here on duty, relaxed somewhat. Some renewed acquaintances with long-lost colleagues or friends.

The office had been enlarged for the occasion, as a group of fifty persons was now hovering around the place, greeting friends and trying to find a place to sit. Once everyone was settled, Dumbledore spoke first, assuming his role of leader once more.

“Welcome everyone. To the ones who I meet regularly in that fashion, welcome again. To the others, let me present you a very special group of people, dedicated in fighting Voldemort or any other Dark Lord like him, before him, and we’d like to be alive afterwards to take care of the next one too. We fought Voldemort during his first rise, and we’ll continue now, like the phoenix which rises from his ashes again and again. This day will be very special, and it’s my pleasure to welcome you in the Order of the Phoenix.”

A third of the people seated applauded. The ones who didn’t applaud were the newly inducted members, and they looked around them, still unsure about the people in the room. Seeing their confusion, the old Professor spoke again.

“The membership in the Order of the Phoenix gives you an inside view of the forces of the Light. It will allow a better protection around you by providing special locations, special guards, and special training. Conversely, it also allows the Order to use special talents or abilities to their fullest in this war.” He winked towards Tonks, who had the grace to blush slightly. “Of course, this is on a voluntary manner. We’ll ask you at one point if you agree to undertake such missions.”

As he continued, his face and voice became sinister. “However, I feel that circumstances are pushing us to volunteer ourselves soon. That’s also why the Hogsmeade village has been evacuated in the

castle. For those of you who don't know about it yet, Dementors have left Azkaban, and they are headed this way. This move is signed by the group of people we are currently at war against: Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

The sharp intakes of breath heard around the room were a clear indication that there would be some work to convince everyone to dare say that accursed man's name. However, they weren't shouting, crying, or doing whatever stupid action crowds tended to. Dumbledore smiled faintly. This was no crowd. This was an army in making. He became serious again. "To everyone, I have the displeasure to inform you that the Dementors' escapade is going faster than predicted. They have been spotted by wizards near Inverness a while ago, and I fear they will be here in the evening."

In the commotion that ensued, Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody spoke loudly, successfully reclaiming attention. The man was a grizzled and retired Auror with a wooden leg and a magical eye, and he was well-known in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for his temper and paranoia, something which made the room silent again soon.

"QUIET! People, calm down! Now, Albus, I understand that the wards will protect the castle?"

"Normally, yes, Alastor. But I felt something tugging at them this morning. After a quick sweep of the grounds, we didn't see anyone threatening the school. I can't eliminate the possibility of a curse breaker in Voldemort's ranks, though." Raising his arms to prevent further disorder, as he saw that several persons had sat up, he went on. "Even if the few professional curse breakers are bound by an oath not to use their skills to harm, and even if most of them are employed by a few select companies, we can't reject that possibility."

He looked toward Molly Weasley and she nodded in return. He then addressed everyone else. "You have perhaps read that Bill Weasley has been missing for some time. I hope that he has nothing to do in it and that we will find him in a good health."

“We are not here to discuss about that, although remotely. I have a choice to make about two missions.”

That perked everybody's ears, and they leaned on, while the old wizard continued.

“Obviously, the first mission will be the castle's protection itself. We thought... I thought that we had more time on our hands, and we didn't send the children home. Sending them now would be pure slaughter so it's excluded also. The other factor in this is the Ministry Department of Law Enforcement, which can't really help us. The only personnel they could afford to give us are already here, as the other Aurors try to maintain peace in the now-deserted Azkaban. Needless to say, there have been cases of prisoners escaping after the Dementors left. Most of the escapees were Death Eaters, and our intelligence thinks that they have joined the ranks of their master.”

This bit of news was received with gasps and angry shouts. Sensing that their side was in a bad shape, people started to argue again, about responsibilities and battle plans. However, the old and imperturbable Moody started to tap his wooden leg on the floor repeatedly. The clicking sound unnerved everyone, but quieted them as well, allowing the scarred Auror to ask a question.

“Albus, you spoke about two missions.”

“True. If you all would calm down, we will tell you about a breakthrough that we made, concurrently with our enemy, Voldemort.” Dumbledore seemed not to notice the still fair number of people wincing upon hearing the accursed name, and carried on. “Severus?”

The Potion Master, still on the throes of his discussions with the Dementor, raised his head suddenly as if awakening, and shook himself before standing up to speak.

“I know that, over the years, most of us have been informed of the particularly successful achievements of some Hogwarts students, whether it is for future careers or plain Order information. In the

current school year, there has been a markedly studious student here, Miss Hermione Granger. Not satisfied with the regular school work, she has often directed herself towards other studious activities. In the previous years, it had been her self-imposed task to follow Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley in their dangerous trips around the school.” it took Snape’s best effort to repress the reflex sneer on speaking those names, but he managed, to Dumbledore amused look “This year, she had taken a particular interest in the... I’ll ask you not to shout after this. She studied theoretical means of communicating with any creatures, especially Dementors.”

People around the table gasped, but kept quiet as Snape was about to continue.

“She has read that no one had ever been interested in the soul-sucking creatures in a long time, everybody being quite content of them guarding Azkaban Island, and she suspected that someone able to communicate with them could possibly give them orders. That idea led to the abstract fact that Voldemort could be able to direct a small army of them into battle. Alas, she had been proven true recently.

“Interested in her research, and with Albus’ guidance, I worked with her on a real Dementor, and we discovered various facts. First, all of them appear to share their thoughts, and they call themselves the Cohort, collectively. Speaking with one was like speaking with all of them. We discovered that we could give orders to all of them while only speaking to one. We also found out that an unknown device, supposedly hidden in Azkaban, could help in speaking with them. You see, at the current rate, we can only exchange a couple of sentences per day, through a mix of magic and muggle devices. The other way of communicating with them was through a modified Legilimency spell, but the split second I spent in one of their mind was debilitating enough. I suspect that Voldemort forced his servants to do that, though, as I can’t imagine him meddling with muggle tools like our current Minister.”

Some of the people around the table, who knew of Arthur Weasley’s annoying fascination with muggle appliances, smiled at this, while

others looked around in bewilderment. Unfazed by their lack of understanding, the Potion Master carried on.

“Yesterday, when Albus took on the Dementor questioning, he ordered them not to attack Hogwarts, but the creature answered that Voldemort already ordered the attack and prevented any counter order. That’s why we have Dementors heading this way. They don’t even feed off the areas they pass through.”

Albus stood up, and spoke while the other man sat down. Even if he had plenty of questions for the old man, concerning a golden griffin and an animagus, Severus would have to wait to ask them.

“Thank you, Severus. The second mission I mentioned earlier was to discover the communication device hidden in Azkaban. The Dementors call it a Commanding Helm, and it is supposed to be protected by powerful illusions.

“Now, we are going to split our numbers. Anyone proficient enough with the Patronus charm will stay here to defend the castle, aided by our most talented students in that regard. If you can summon a corporeal Patronus, raise your hand.”

Almost everyone raised theirs; the ones not raised being the members more into the political wing of the order. However, these ones couldn’t fight very well either, and Albus had a problem on his hands.

“As Aurors are currently patrolling the prison, our other mission shouldn’t need a fighting aspect. We discovered that Voldemort hadn’t asked the questions relative to the Commanding Helm, but we can’t hope that he won’t know about it soon. It means that there could be some physical opposition on the way, although less than if the Death Eaters wouldn’t be occupied with attacking Hogwarts already. Illusions are to be expected also, so I guess that you could be assigned this task, Alastor.”

Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody grumbled something about keeping him out of harm’s way, but he relented anyway. After all, his magical eye, able to see through illusions, would be of invaluable help there.

Seeing that everything was on its way, and having to question the Dementor to get information about ways to wound them, Severus Snape excused himself and quickly left the office. Once back in his house, he found Hermione napping, her head on her arms on the study table she had assigned herself. He woke her gently and summed up what had transpired from the meeting.

While he prepared himself to interrogate the soul-sucker again, she was plunged in thoughts. She even interrupted him as he was about to drink the potion.

“Ron has to go.”

“What?”

“I think Ronald Weasley has to go to Azkaban to search for the Helm.”

“Why would he be of any help? He can’t even defend himself!”

“I know that. It’s just that he demonstrated some... I don’t know... some kind of ‘visionary’ talent. Remember the alley with the lions? He knew something there. That kind of talent could be useful while searching for the Helm. And his brothers can protect him.”

He thought about it for a moment, before giving in. He informed Dumbledore of this bit of information through the Floo, and privately added that Hermione should be included in the Order of the Phoenix. To disguise his interest in his student’s career, he used the pretext of not wanting to be the messenger between the girl and the Head of the Order. Albus chuckled at that, having read through his Potion Master. Cutting the connection, Snape finished his preparation and went to discuss with the wretched creature again.

In Hogwarts, the meeting continued, being more a pre-battle plan than any of their usual reunions. Madam Rosmerta, who owned the pub 'The Three Broomsticks' in Hogsmeade, as well as Arabella Figg and Hestia Jones, initial members of the Order of the Phoenix, were quite talented in healing, and they went to get acquainted with Madam Pomfrey and the Hospital Wing. Even if Arabella Figg couldn't cast spells because she was a squib, she was quite proficient with bandages and could help the wounded.

The ones apt for fighting were sent on reconnaissance on the many spots where the enemy could attack. It was going to be a battle to the death, and they all knew it, so they collapsed and magically sealed every secondary entrance. A special team, led by Sturgis Podmore and reluctantly joined by Filch, was given a list of secret passages locations to collapse them. Remus and Sirius, assisted by a few others, explored the castle to tag the noteworthy spying places. The remaining witches and wizards spent time casting several spells on several dozen broaches transfigured from a box of needles. For the first time in history, first-year courses in Transfiguration were used in a war effort.

In mid-afternoon, Dumbledore summoned all students and teachers in the Great Hall, and counted them magically. Once he was sure that everybody was there, he sealed the Hall's massive doors. Whoever wanting to enter or exit would use the Professor's entrance, and that one was hidden from the outside. This done, he softly called for one of his preferred house-elf.

"Dobby."

Nobody knew how the diminutive and hyperactive creature and the tall and calm human had met each other. Fewer then knew that it was Harry Potter who had freed the house-elf from the clutches of the Malfoy patriarch. As it was, linked by their mutual love of the finest socks, the house-elf appeared to the wizard in a happy pop before hugging Dumbledore's legs. Here too, nobody knew an apparation pop could even sound happy but the creature was a reserve of happiness in itself. After smiling, thinking that everybody would need that kind of reserve soon, Dumbledore separated Dobby from his... socks.

“Dobby, I need this room furnished so that the young people here can live in it. I will take some of them with me, but please add some walls to make bedrooms, bathrooms, and the like. Afterwards, you will direct the other house-elves in preparing a snack and later a dinner. I don’t know how long it will be before the Headmistress or I can take the matter of the meals in our hands.”

He looked thoughtful, remembering a job interview from one of his current teachers, a long time ago. When he spoke again, it was even more quietly than before. “In fact, two adults will stay here, Dobby. Professor Sinistra will keep an eye around, and you will refer to her until I come back. I will send you someone else afterwards, a wizard called Elphias Doge. He is a good friend of mine, and you will treat him as such.”

The elf had been bobbing his head up and down all along, his tennis-ball-sized eyes fixed on the wizard. When Dumbledore paused, Dobby judged it was his cue. “Of course, mister Dumbley. I will be preparing room and food. I will...”

“Dobby, wait.” Dumbledore had just the time to take hold of the diminutive creature before Dobby could lunge away. Looking at him in his oversized eyeballs, he spoke again, barely suppressing a laugh. “Not now, Dobby. Wait until I leave the room to begin with creating the rooms.”

“Oh. Okay, great mister Dumbley. I waiting now. Good?”

“Good.”

And the elf vanished. Bracing himself, Dumbledore then turned towards the 250 students facing him, who did still not understand why they had been summoned, locked shut, and why Dumbledore was talking with an agitated house-elf who wore more socks than was humanly possible.

“Students!”

The word drew the attention of every single soul in the hall. Well, those who were engaged listened too.

“You have being called to be informed of a matter of great urgency and importance.”

Total silence.

“We are going to be attacked. Soon.”

Total chaos.

Dumbledore had to spend the best part of two minutes to get the calm back.

“I’m not going to answer your answers about it yet, because time is the essence, now. However, if you reflect on the creatures we pushed you to study recently, you might have an idea of what awaits us.”

At this, more cries erupted in the room. Some fragile young students fainted, and Madam Pomfrey had to help them. When the commotion died down again, Albus Dumbledore braced himself again.

“You see, we didn’t make you study it by chance. What I will ask you now require a great strength of mind to answer positively, so I won’t be disappointed if nobody steps forward to volunteer for the defence of Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore had thought that chaos would erupt again, but a foreboding silence settled in the large dining hall. The sudden thought that he misspelled some word or another struck him, and he drew a deep breath to ask again, when a chair scraped on the floor, and Ron Weasley stood up, before walking towards the aged professor.

“What are you doing?” asked Dumbledore, not quite understanding why one student, and especially this one, would step up like this.

Looking him with abnormally piercing eyes, Ron answered “Stepping forward. I volunteer.”

Of course, that sentence was met by shouts, as most of the Gryffindors, bold and brave as they were, realized that they had been stepped over. The other Houses followed suit also. The Hufflepuffs were loyal to the school and a great deal of them wanted to protect it. Several of the Ravenclaws thought that a real battle was a unique opportunity to learn something new. And even a few Slytherins thought that something could be gained from it. The line of volunteers extended until meeting the now sealed doors and even more people were still pooling there.

“Very well. Very well. I’m proud of you. We are proud of you.” Dumbledore indicated, encompassing the staff with his gesture. Remembering something from the draft of battle plans he had briefly spoken with Moody about, he added “I feel I have to inform you that there will be danger.”

A loud cheer welcomed this remark. The students were wise enough to understand that an attack meant danger. Even Ellen McCullough, the Hufflepuff first year who fainted, knew that. So they gave themselves courage in front of the adversity by doing the only thing they knew: yelling their youth and their will to live to the face of the world.

Dumbledore was moved, but he had other things to say. “You know that there will be Dementors. We will ask for some of you to produce corporeal Patronuses. The others will have things to do, protecting them from curses that could be thrown from other opponents.”

A girl in the volunteering file spoke up. “Other opponents, sir?”

“Yes, Marig. Dementors don’t move like that by themselves. They are sided with... Death Eaters.”

A dead silence fell on the hall, and Ellen fainted again, this time joined by Mandy Prosperius, another young witch this time from Ravenclaw. The students in the line looked visibly nervous.

Dumbledore spoke again. "True, I should have told you so beforehand. I will understand if you don't want to volunteer anymore. Although I have a quieter job for some of you not cut for battle. I will need eyes." Seeing incomprehension in most faces, he elaborated. "We need spies who will inform us of every movement on the ground. They will not fight and will be given mean to retreat to safety should anything happen. Now... make your decision. We will be leaving in five minutes, and then the elves will arrange this Hall so that the remaining students can live in it."

"I'm not retreating right now, General."

Once again, Ronald Weasley managed to surprise everyone within hearing range. Which included pretty much everyone in the worrying silence. But his sentence had another effect.

"General?" Dumbledore was intrigued.

"Yes, sir. We need an identifier to call you in the battle. You're not Headmaster anymore, and there are many Professors. You are leading us to battle, General."

The Weasley twins, a few ranks behind Ron, looked at each other in wonder, then mischief. "I like the sound of it..."

"...it sounds like we are invincible."

"We are led to battle..."

"...by the General himself!"

"The General..."

The word began to be repeated by several students in the room, as well as some teachers.

"General."

The word acquired strength, as if it was given birth in front of everyone, out of everyone.

“General!”

The cheer which rose threatened to make everyone deaf.

“GENERAL!”

The newly-appointed General Dumbledore raised his hand, and instant silence reigned in the hall. He looked at his hand, surprised. Did he cast a wandless Silencing spell? Looking at the students, he realized that no. They were in their character, now. And he had to be in his, for their sake. Realizing the mix-up of houses in the now three-persons-wide line of volunteers, he instantly decided on a rallying cry.

“United, we stand!”

The motto was repeated by the students, and everyone then calmed down. Hiding a smirk, Dumbledore gestured to Remus Lupin and Sirius Black. Short of himself and Filch, both too old to run around the castle, these two knew the building like their own pocket. He took a bag in one of his pockets and enlarged it. Inside were the results of quite a bit of spellcasting. He took one crude broach out and showed it to the students.

“This is how we are going to communicate. You are going to be split into teams, and two persons in each team will put that broach on. Everything said while pressing it will be sent to me. Now, those volunteering for a spying job, step toward professors Lupin and Black. After splitting you, they will assign you your places.”

Sirius spoke up. “Thank you, Alb... General. We will need twelve teams of two. That’s 24 students, yes, Miss Brocklehurst. All of these teams will be assigned places to stay and spy, and report everything unusual through the brooches. If anything happens, use the broach to call for someone. Don’t leave the room unless there is immediate danger, understood? No wandering around!” He waited to catch everyone’s eye, making sure that the message was correctly grasped.

It was tearing his Marauder's heart, but this was war, and these kids had to obey. "Eight of these teams will be assigned spying places outside, and four will be inside."

"Why inside?" blurted Tracey Davis, one of the few Slytherins to stand in the line.

"You are questioning me?" Sirius had a twinkle of his own, but his demeanour was serious and the girl was quite taken aback.

"Err... no, sir?"

"You should." At this, he smiled and she knew that she had been had. She stayed in the line, however. If anything is taught in Slytherin, it's that turncoats are never appreciated. Well... when doing so openly, of course.

"To answer Miss Davis, the inside places are to be sure that there is no inside invasion. That no Death Eater finds a crack in our inner wards and starts to Apparate anywhere. You'll sure start by missing some of the action, but, believe me, your work will be most important if you actually see someone trudging in."

In the following silence, Remus patted Sirius' shoulder, muttering "You scared them, now. Way to go, Padfoot." He then straightened up, and asked "Volunteers for spying, come here."

While the crowd skimmed itself, Dumbledore talked again. "In the same way, there will be teams of defenders sent in several places in the castle. I do hope that none will get hurt, and we will redistribute the teams if the need arises. Please come towards me in three files. On my right, those who had successfully cast a corporeal Patronus in front of our resident Dementor. On my left, those who can't cast a Patronus at all but wish to defend, using the usual spells. In the middle, those of you who can do both, and those who either succeeded in producing sparks or a mist against the Dementor or a full animal without the Dementor's influence."

The crowd sorted itself, and Dumbledore was quite satisfied that all lines were of equal length.

“Albus?”

He turned around and saw the perplexed face of Sirius. “Yes?”

“They are too many.”

The ‘General’ Dumbledore looked at his waiting would-be troops. Truth be told, they were five more students, all eager to participate in this. Dumbledore was happy that there were more than needed rather than fewer. Reflecting about this, he quickly answered. “Keep one team of two in here and redistribute the three others. One in the north, the others around the Entrance.”

“Yes General!” Sirius mock-saluted and Dumbledore chuckled. He wouldn’t hear the end of it. His thought stopped suddenly. He wouldn’t hear the end of it... if the school was still standing tomorrow. Sighing, he returned to his battle groups while Sirius and Remus led the spies out of the Great Hall, promising to come back later for the fighters.

“We are going to split you in several groups of four students, and each group will be headed by an adult witch or wizard. In a group, you will obey that adult, understood?”

“Yes, General!”

He sighed again. These kids were playing war. He hoped that it would stay a game for most of them, but doubted it. Pondering about the meaning of life and such trivialities, he stumbled upon three redheads.

The Weasleys! He had almost forgotten Hermione’s advice, relayed by Snape.

Looking around, he noticed that Ginny must have left with the spies. Not to attract undue attention to them, he rounded them for another group of four, assigning them with Cedric Diggory.

When Remus and Sirius came back, panting, from their roundabout in the castle, Dumbledore had split the groups, and had told them not to move, as he knew precisely which group he wanted where.

Wishing a good afternoon to the students staying, he led the students out of the Great Hall like the pied piper, and led them first towards the Battle Room, also followed by the teachers. Once there, he gave each group the accompanying adult corresponding to his plan. Then, one group after another, he dispatched them around the castle, in the places that have been cleaned and prepared by the reconnaissance team. In classrooms, furniture had been moved to provide maximum protection. In the offices, dorms, and private quarters which had been deemed interesting places to fight, the private stuff had been stowed away and the furniture had followed the same rule than the classrooms: maximum cover, protection, and opportunity of fire.

After dropping a dozen groups, the remaining students were startled to find themselves in the Entrance Hall.

“Dear students, colleagues, and friends.” Dumbledore had turned, his back to the gates, and his tone was foreboding. “In my whole career, I had always hoped that a day like this would never come. Alas, Fate proved me wrong, once again.” He looked at his troops and his heart rose in his throat. He swallowed the tears that threatened the image of a strong leader he had to give. He smiled, thinking about a sentence he had read, once, a day that he was bored and indulged in some cheap muggle literature. A sentence that a tough leader could use right now. “Let’s just prove to these bastards that we are tougher than them!”

The shocked silence lapsed only half a second, before the cheers erupted from the galvanized people. The shouts could be heard far into the castle, and, for a moment, they thought they heard an echo until they realized that the other groups must be cheering too.

Dumbledore was pained. These ones were the best. The others they had dispatched in the classrooms were going to fight from a distance. Of course, there was danger. But the ones in the Entrance Hall were going to clash directly with the Dementors. A sudden idea came to him and he silently called forth his Phoenix familiar. Once the ball of flames had receded, everyone looked at the beautiful bird in awe. Dumbledore spent a few seconds in silent discussion with the bird, before nodding, and addressing the defenders again. "Here is Fawkes, 'my' phoenix, even if I have the impression that I belong more to him than him to me." After the chuckles died down, he continued. "Know that he will stay here and help you during the fight."

He raised his arm, and the Phoenix flew up and settled on the chandelier, before singing. Dumbledore had told him to, for a few seconds, so that the defenders wouldn't be surprised or too relaxed should that happen in mid-fight. Comforted by the magical song, the students, teachers, Aurors, and town people began to place themselves according to the plan that Dumbledore and Moody had drawn, aided by Fletcher and others. The usual exits were blocked by conjured vertical walls. Several inside balconies were added so that the defenders would be in the air, most of them out of reach of the Dementors. Before leaving, though, Dumbledore went to the group with the three redheads.

"You okay, boys?"

"Yes, General!" they all answered at once.

"Easy, easy. Mr. Diggory, I have something to say to the Weasleys."

"Right away, sir." He turned around, and spotted the flying instructor nearby. "I'll be helping Professor Hooch." he said, before doing that.

Cutting the pleasantries, Dumbledore looked intently at Ron. "Someone asked me to include you in a mission."

"A mission?" Fred and George didn't complete each other's sentence that time, as they said it together, mouth opened wide in awe. Nobody in his right mind would give the twins an Earth-saving

mission, but Dumbledore was there, cursing his lack of options. Ron was looking at him, unfazed.

“Yes, a mission. You are going to Azkaban-”

“Already?”

“We didn’t do anything!”

After a stern glance, which calmed twins somewhat, he started again. “As I was trying to say before being interrupted, you are going to Azkaban... to recover an item. Well, if my contact was any good, you two are going there to protect your brother here. He should work at finding the... that artefact.”

The twins looked at each other. What ensued was one of the chief annoyances of the twins: the ability to hold a whole conversation without audible element. After a few seconds, they turned towards Dumbledore again.

“We accept.”

“Very well. And you, Ron?”

“I do.”

“Wait for me here, then, I’ll soon lead you to the adult in charge.” Seeing the crestfallen look on George’s face, he chortled. “You didn’t think I was letting you go inside Azkaban without a proper escort, now, did you?”

“Ahem... no...”

“...Of course not.”

“Well, then. I’ll just put Mr. Diggory with another group, then.”

“Too bad, he seems a good bloke...”

“...Can hold his own against our jokes!”

Tuning out their good-natured banter, he went to Cedric Diggory and set him in another group. To his question about the Weasleys, Dumbledore looked at him pointedly and winked, before uttering “Top Secret”.

He then left the Entrance Hall with the three young redheads in tow. After explaining the Azkaban mission to them, he rounded Moody and the two Aurors he had chosen, and, giving them a portkey to come back, he sent them on the prison island.

The next thing Dumbledore did was looking through the window, reflecting about what he should do. True, he was one of the most powerful wizards alive, and he could out-duel almost anyone. However, that wasn't going to be a proper duel at all. He could hold his own in such a battle too, but he was older than before, and couldn't somersault to evade curses like before. And, in front of Dementors, his Patronus was as good as anyone's. He could stay in the room and conduct the battle as a whole, but then, his magical power would be quite useless...

His magical power.

Of course!

He mentally slapped himself on the forehead. No need to show these people around that he forgot something. He went to McGonagall, and spoke softly to her.

“Minerva.”

The tone was quite urgent, and she looked up, startled. “Albus?”

“I need to go in the inner Headmaster office. Have you changed the password?”

“No. Why?”

“I forgot that I still have the ability to strengthen the wards. They have been mollified, that I can perceive, but I can straighten them before they fall. Only...”

“Yes?”

“It will wear me out. I won’t be able to fight immediately if the need arises.”

“Oh! Albus! What will you do?”

“That’s the question I have been asking myself recently.”

“You think that the Azkaban mission will be successful? That this... this ‘helmet’ will be useable to direct these creatures? I heard that they counted in hundreds...”

“Precisely. But, rather than bet on the student’s ability to defend the castle against these beasts, I prefer to give my own energy. You’ll be the link between me and the Battle Room. If the helmet arrives before the wards fail, that’s for the better. However, if the wards fail completely, I will be exhausted, so...”

“I know, Albus... I’ll know what to do.”

They nodded, and separated, the wizened professor heading in the remote part of the Headmistress quarters, where the room controlling the wards was.

The sun was descending in the horizon, and the still castle was waiting for the onslaught.

To be continued in next chapter: Horrors...

Did they meet or did they not?  
I could leave a happier note.  
However, the battle comes,  
Heavens’ll rage soon at them worms.

## Chapter 23 – Horrors

When the dark creatures arrived from the North, after running all that time, they weren't breathing heavily. They weren't breathing at all. They didn't need to breathe, in fact, so it was no surprise anyway. The Death Eaters apparated there quickly hereafter, and prepared the castle siege under the failing light of the setting sun. Voldemort himself came to supervise the assault, even if he didn't want to endanger his spirit state. For instance, he wouldn't lead his followers into the fray and subsequently die before everyone else. It wouldn't be good to pass to history as the first Dark Lord to do that. No, no. Voldemort, like most dark lords, would drive his forces from the back. Consequently, the first thing they did was taking hold of the Quidditch pitch as base camp and regroup there.

Dumbledore's spies on this side of the castle commented the move with distress in their voice. It wasn't every day that you saw Death Eaters take your favourite sport's terrain as base. The idea, however, would greatly amuse a certain pair of troublemakers when they would stumble upon it.

The outer ward, protecting the castle from malevolent creatures and wizards, had been weakened by Bill's attempts, but Dumbledore had steadily refuelled them with his own strength. When Voldemort arrived and stopped Bill's attempts to debrief with him, Dumbledore had felt that the wards' energy stopped leaking. His satisfaction was short-lived, though, as McGonagall barged in the room where he was working. Her distressed face showed enough.

They were there.

The aged professor, chief warlock and great mugwump, wanted to put as much power as possible in the wards before managing the battle itself, though. Free from the distraction caused by Bill's gnawing attempts, he concentrated and released a large surge of energy into the wards, causing him to fall on the ground, panting. Even if she wasn't quite ready for him to fall down, McGonagall caught him at the last moment, and she also had several potions with her, rightfully expecting a case of severe magical exhaustion. Taking the wizened head in her hands, she managed to slip a Pepper-up

potion and another energy refilling draught, more exotic and more potent.

When they came back to the Battle Room, Filius Flitwick, Charms Professor and Head of the Ravenclaw House, had just finished casting a long and complicated spell that Madam Pince had found a short while ago. The result was breathtaking, as a ghost-like representation of Hogwarts graced the middle of the room. Several dots were present in it, each having one of several colours. Glancing at the different points, there wasn't much difficulty to guess which was which. Gryffindors were red, Slytherins green, Ravenclaw blue and Hufflepuff yellow. It also seemed that older student were lighter than the younger ones. Teachers were white and other people were grey, without a distinction between Aurors and town people. Hogwarts castle had only a limited sentence, after all, and it only recognized those who lived in it.

"There!" the diminutive professor, always cheerful, exclaimed. "I have to prepare myself for the downstairs action, so, if you will excuse me, I leave Madam Pince to explain the spell."

With these words, and a flourish, he disappeared in the circular stairs. The office door had been left open. The incredulous gazes turned from the stairway to the mousy librarian, who blushed, unused to the stares. Sensing that the Headmistress, a fellow in knowledge, was patting her back reassuringly, she explained the spell. Its casting was complicated, but once done, using it was easy. Anyone in the room could ask to zoom towards a given room by pointing at it with a wand. She demonstrated by zooming the Entrance Hall. Some gasped at the grim determination that emanated from the battle formations, but found their wits again when they noticed the white dot who had just joined the ranks. Flitwick, as a Charm expert full of happiness, was going to build a figurative wall of Patronus against the Dementors.

They went to the maximum zoom outwards, and noticed a cloud of black dots in the smoky shape that represented the Quidditch pitch. At that point, nobody had to ask what it meant. Still, in these, some where so intense that they seemed to radiate blackness.

They waited. And waited. As the Death Eaters seemed not to move, Dumbledore moved some of the defending teams on the side of the castle nearest the Quidditch pitch to be able to intercept them should they move soon. After half an hour of waiting, the sun was almost set, but the ghostly representation of the castle neatly showed a column of dots emerging from the Quidditch pitch and going for the nearest entrance, which was on the northwest side of the castle. A bit afterwards, reports from spies surveying that area came to indicate that Dementors and Death Eaters were heading toward the castle. The column got stopped by the magical barrier, though, and the Death Eaters seemed to regroup to discuss about the best way to bring them down. Seeing an opportunity, and knowing that the wards wouldn't prevent spells from the inside out, Dumbledore activated the communicator towards the proper teams and ordered fire.

A flurry of coloured beams erupted from the classroom windows, as several defenders, students and adults alike, sent their best spells toward the attacking army. Said army, however, was made of Death Eaters and Dementors. Most spells were useless against Dementors, and Death Eaters quickly recovered, shielded themselves, and retaliated. Stunned Death Eaters were revived and attacked the castle as well. The wards, however, were keeping the attacking spells at bay, and a few Death Eaters came back to the Quidditch pitch, presumably to converse with their master about this new development.

A while afterwards, Dumbledore paled when he saw what the invading army was doing. The worried reports confirmed that they were positioning themselves around the ward. Even when defenders increased their rate of fire, the attackers shielded themselves all the time. Some clever defenders made use of conjured items dropped on the attackers' heads, and others transfigured the soil into a thick mud, but it wasn't enough to prevent the strange battle formation.

When a hundred Dementors and fifty Death Eaters were positioned, they all acted at the same time. Death Eaters used their most powerful spell, which was the Killing curse for most of them, and the Dementors pressed their mouth forward until it met the ward itself. Said ward began to become visible because of the strain, and took a whiter and whiter colour as seconds ticked by. The barrage of curses

and soul-sucking effect continued for a while, during which the defenders used their best spells to counteract the attacking force. Nine Death Eaters fell during that time, only to be brought back to be replaced by others. After a full five minutes of this, the magical shield couldn't take any more and exploded with an enormous popping sound and a magical backlash. Several Death Eaters were knocked out for good, and a few Dementors even fell on the ground due to the explosion.

The people in the Battle Room didn't need the reports to know that the ward had fallen, and everyone in the castle was warned too, because a loud alarm, like a large bell, resounded in the castle. Overjoyed about their imminent victory, the Death Eaters rushed to the entrance that had been their initial target, but got the surprise of finding it sealed shut. Even Explosion spells weren't going far in the thick slab of stone that had been conjured behind the doors. On top of that, people from above were still shooting spells at them. In the mad rush and the confusion that followed, the Death Eaters got hit by several other curses. For the most part, spells sent by the students were debilitating at most, but they served as distraction and the affected Death Eaters were an easier prey for the Aurors and teachers who could disable them.

The attackers didn't press their attack there, as their main goal was to enter. Leading the Dementors around the castle, the Death Eaters went for the only door that the defenders hadn't sealed: the main entrance. Their reasoning was that, judging by the sheer size of the doors, sealing these would have been difficult. On top of that, the defenders still needed to get out at one point.

When the last spell echoed in the classrooms that the defenders were using around the side entrance, the defenders looked around grimly. Of the six teams that had been dispatched there, three were covered in dust from fallen debris. Said debris had also hit some people, and Patricia Stimpson, a fourth-year Gryffindor, as well as Penelope Clearwater, a six-year Ravenclaw, had been buried under a fallen support beam and other debris. Percy Weasley, who had wanted to be in the same team, was in tears near the collapse. Emmeline Vance had seen this kind of setting time and time again due to her

active participation in the Order of the Phoenix, and she sternly moved the crying young man on the side, her wand toward the rubble.

“Aedificium Leviosa.”

The enhanced levitation spell was mostly used to build houses, as it enabled the caster to lift parts of buildings. The whole pile of rubble went slowly to the air, releasing the battered and unconscious shapes of the two girls. A notice to the Battle Room and two Mobilicorpus later, the team left their hideout towards the Hospital Wing. After putting the wounded in bed in the care of the healing staff, the rest of the team reported again, and got dispatched to the front side, where the battle raged. Thankfully, due to the preparation of the classroom for the battle, causing difficulties for the Death Eaters to aim inside, the two girls lying in the infirmary were the only wounded of the battle opening.

Hogwarts wasn't protected by a magical shield anymore, except the inner castle wards preventing Apparation and hiding the castle from Muggles. Knowing this, the attackers launched themselves onto the gates. Half of the Dementors turned around the castle, trying to distress the defenders by making them relive their worst memories. The other half was stationed around the main entrance, having the same effect on the people there. The defenders stopped fighting for a few seconds, trying to evade the cold feeling.

While the soul-sucking creatures turned around the castle, making the nearest defenders relive their saddest memories, the Death Eaters used the respite provided by the Dementors to concentrate on opening the great bronze doors. The Dementors couldn't unlock them, so the job was left to the dark wizards, and curse after curse were thrown on the gates. However, each and every curse was repelled by another magical shield, which kept the door impervious to break-in. Hogwarts' wards had multiple levels, and only the outer one had been breached yet. However, to the defenders' anguish, someone was with the Death Eaters. Someone who had red hair and who wasn't wearing the usual black robe and white mask. Someone who advanced towards the door, protected from curses by shields raised by the Death Eaters. Someone whose face was a mask of intense pain.

Albus Dumbledore had been warned by the strange colour of the dot on the ghostly three-dimensional map of Hogwarts. The dot was mostly black, but was sometimes blinking red. Alerted by the reports, he went to the window to see the happenstance with his own eyes. And once there, he couldn't believe said eyes. Molly Weasley, who was there too, and who had grasped her family name in the quick report, went to the window too, and fainted on the spot. There, apparently working for the enemy, and trying to lower the magic holding the door, was Bill Weasley. Dumbledore could only think of one way to reach through the multiple shields around the Curse Breaker. Three ways, actually, except that he wasn't fond to use any of them. Sighing, he reflected that it was a war situation and it justified the Unforgivable. He opened a window pane, aimed his wand on Bill, and whispered a single word.

“Imperio.”

His plan was to take control of his target, but to make him appear like he was breaking the wards unsuccessfully so that he wouldn't be executed on the spot by his Death Eater guards. To his utter astonishment, he found that Bill's mind had been tampered with, and that he couldn't control him at all. That was a bad news in itself, but brought forth a slightly good one also: at least, the redhead wasn't there on his free will.

Sensing the shield on the door lowering, and notified by his spies that the Dementors were grouping on the castle front, he quickly ordered that the students and adults most proficient in the Patronus, and who weren't in the Entrance Hall yet, regroup there. They would need everything in their power to push the creatures back. They wouldn't stand forever, though, and he hoped that either Moody's team or Severus would find a way out of that mess. He then sat down and contemplated the numerous dots moving from their previous position into the Entrance Hall, while Minerva McGonagall reported sending Molly Weasley to the infirmary with a prescription of calming draughts. The General wasn't quite listening, though, as his attention had been caught by a red dot moving away from a classroom on the highest floor. They had decided to position the fighting groups no higher than the second floor, as it wouldn't be effective to hurl spells from too high,

and the highest levels would be taken by the spying groups. Obviously, one of the spies had decided to disregard the orders to stay in place and to go... to the Entrance Hall.

A bit earlier, in one of the spying turrets...

Like every spy on the northwest side of the castle, Ginny Weasley noticed the arrival of the Death Eaters and Dementors. Watching them, she had also felt a little weird when one of the people among the Death Eaters wasn't wearing the usual attire of their dark activity. The man was holding his head high, and he was laughing. She had shaken herself, before staring, annoyed, at her assigned colleague, Colin Creevey. For sure, the boy was quite happy to be there with her, despite the circumstances, and he was talking endlessly. She had to shush him several time, and she was ready to do it again when something clicked in her head.

How could she hear the strange man laugh when he was down the Quidditch pitch, especially with Colin blabbering nearby?

She knew that laugh. She had heard it a whole year in her head.

She felt her cheeks lose all their blood, and was on the verge of losing consciousness, but took hold of the cold stone windowsill, and the contact jolted her awake. Voldemort was there! She took the brooch and pressed it urgently, while looking towards the pitch. What she saw, though, made her drop the transfigured ornament in fright before dropping on the floor, really unconscious this time.

Voldemort had been looking straight at her.

When Colin had succeeded in waking her, the fight had started already, and she could only look at him in wonder before remembering everything. Her eyes wide, she grasped him.

“Where is everyone?”

“They are all in the Entrance Hall. They are going to enter!”

It didn't need a genius to understand which persons were designated by each sentence, and Ginny took off. Voldemort was here, and she had to warn whoever was managing the defence about that.

The ancient spell shielding the gates, which had never been renewed in half a millennium, and upon which all hopes now stood, broke down not long afterwards afterwards, and the Death Eaters began to cast every destruction spell they knew on the gigantic bronze doors. Said doors were broken down instantly under the intense spell storm. A part of it was vaporized under the pressure, another exploded inwards, thankfully only grazing a few defenders on the way, and showering all of them in splinters and dust. A slab of bronze even melted to the ground, revealing the previously strong oaken structure of the door. When the defenders were able to defend themselves again, the entrance was open and Dementors were charging.

There were many people around the hall, though, standing in different areas. The younger defenders had even been levitated to a high hiding place. At least, they wouldn't be reached easily by the Dementors. Everyone had also been given chocolate and a vial of potion, to counter the distressing effect of the soul-sucking creatures. Fawkes was still there, perched high and ready to sing to invigorate the defenders against the damned creatures. On the first ranks, there were some people from the town, who had insisted to partake in the defence. Apart their job, they didn't have a great knowledge of spells, but they had come with their weapons of choice. The couple owning Honeyduke's was there with a claymore each, and the teller of the post office was waving his mace around. To rouse their neighbours spirits, and their own too, they had boasted about the weapons being magically-charged heirlooms, perfectly able to slice anything, even if its name began with 'D' and ended with 'ementor'.

The first Dementors' charge, somewhat slowed by the damaged entrance threshold, was met by an volley of Patronus charms so intense that the whole Entrance Hall looked like the moon had risen in it. Just afterwards, miscellaneous silvery animals could be seen charging into the fray outside, driving the Dementors' stampede away for a while. However, as soon as the way was clear, a shower of curses from the forgotten Death Eaters passed through the destroyed doorway, and several defenders fell, a few lifeless and some bleeding heavily.

The fighting defenders took aim and removed some Death Eaters, but the damage had begun, and there were fewer and fewer Patronuses as the people defending the foyer were more and more tired, distressed, wounded, or plain dead.

After another hour of constant battling, the Dementors succeeded in invading the entrance, barely pushed away by the Patronuses that the remaining defenders sent their way. The damned creatures used their infamous ability of sucking soul to remove permanently some of the most resisting defenders.

Some of these strong defenders were students. A group of students had been particularly efficient in casting their Patronus charms, and had driven away several waves of Dementors. Neville Longbottom and Parvati Patil, hand in hand, were some of the most proficient of the lot. But, when Parvati got ripped from the group by the wretched creatures and Kissed to death, they quickly lost their drive. Neville felt crushed, and wanted to follow his young love.

To everyone's astonishment, he jumped on the Dementor that had just killed his beloved, and, removing the creature's hood, tried to get himself Kissed. However, to everyone's further amazement, the creature recoiled, refusing it.

Not understanding the situation, and angry at the creatures, Neville tried again with another Dementor, to no avail. He started to become furious and, oblivious to the unnatural creatures' reaction, started to bodily attack the creatures. Surprisingly, none of the Dementors was willing to approach him, and he successfully drove a few of them away, before being hit by an explosion curse from a Death Eater. He slumped to the ground, unconscious from the concussion, and was quickly forgotten in the surrounding fight.

In the Headmistress office, a distressed old man was trying to manage a battle he was sure to lose, when two events suddenly happened, at the same time. The office's chimney came to life, and a bizarre-looking item on the desk shrilled.  
Snape's house, a little earlier...

“What does the Helm look like?”

“A... helmet.”

“How does one use it?”

“Wear... and... think.”

“Where is it exactly?”

“Deepest... level... twenty... floors... down.”

“Another thing: how can we destroy you?”

“Air... and... fire.”

“Air and fire? What does that mean?”

“Attack... with... air... and... fire.”

The conversation was going nowhere, and the man had to inform his old colleague of the new developments. He took a Peppering potion vial in his hand, but didn't drink it, as he suddenly remembered the consumption limit of these. He had been awake for a long time already, using those, and couldn't risk magical internal wounds. Motioning to Hermione, he recounted the conversation to her, and shared his conclusions. While he went to sleep, she stepped through the fireplace and used Floo powder to travel to Hogwarts. In Gabriel's Hideaway, earlier...

Tamara was frightened. She had been running in a school corridor when two strong young men had captured her. She had been laid on the floor and asked senseless questions. When she couldn't answer them, her clothes had been ripped, and she had been threatened of the worst. As she still couldn't respond to their questions, they had kicked her unconscious and she was sure that her last seconds of sanity, or even life, had arrived. That's why, when she woke up

completely after a long sleep in which she thought she had had a nightmare in which she fell from a skyscraper, she was startled to notice a strange person still sleeping alongside her in a strange room.

That person, undoubtedly male, had a yellow fur on his whole body, and wings protruding from his back.

The events of the previous day still unclear in her mind, and not recognizing the alien, she panicked and started to push him off the bed. Waking slowly, the creature blinked owlishly at her, and she started to push him harder, also using her fire mastery to burn him. That person was Gabriel, though, and he was quite distraught to see her in that state. The memories of what had happened on the roof came back to his memory, and he was feeling strange himself. Not succeeding in reasoning her, he decided to use his ring to flee her. She had been in the rooms already, he reflected, so she wouldn't be lost anyways. She would calm herself.

He couldn't go back where he came from, though, as it was mid-air from falling. The only location that came to his mind at that point was one he had vowed not to use again, but he uttered the command word nonetheless.

“Hogliewarts.”

He arrived in the office, and was surprised again. This time, it was spotless, although no one was using it. However, he didn't have time to reflect about that, as a recently-installed trap came to life, and wooden bars appeared around him. Nervous about that, he quickly reflected that he wouldn't have any problem to break them if he was in his lion form. As he was already partly transformed, the change took a mere second, and he broke the cage in two powerful pushes.

He then remarked the partly open door and the shouting sounds coming from downstairs. Wary that someone could come to check upon the trap, he quietly exited the office, his paws eliciting no sound from the stone floor.

Once outside, looking over a railing, he stopped abruptly.

On the level below, a few yards under him, people were fighting. More exactly, people were fighting against strange creatures, and seemed to lose. He didn't know where he was, and couldn't really take side in an unknown battle. Therefore, he prepared to turn around to search for another exit when a sudden scream came from the battle. He sought the scream source, his two eyes being an invaluable help, and he stopped breathing.

There, fighting against the wretched creatures, and already bleeding from the battle, was a redhead he knew.

He couldn't leave, now. Not when he just found her again. He put his front paws on the stone railing and extended his wings, ready to drop into the fray. Before doing so, he roared his warning to the people below. No one was to hurt her!

The roar caused a pause in the fighting, and he jumped over the balustrade.

Azkaban...

Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody was a legend in the whole Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and he had no problems passing the numerous barrages of Aurors in the prison. The heterogeneous group, made of a set of redheads and two other Aurors besides Moody, was descending the stairs, searching for their target, when a bird appeared in front of them in a flash of flames.

Fawkes delivered his message to Moody, before going back to Hogwarts immediately. Judging from the bird's agitated state, they all understood that the castle was already under siege, and, after having learned the last update of Snape's conversation from the message, they hurried down, in the corridors barely lit by everlasting torches.

At first, they had passed cells that contained recently arrived prisoners, but found older and older ones each time they descended a flight of stairs. The prison had been built to facilitate the Dementor rounds, and the six intruders had to pass near each and every cell on their way down.

They found the first dead at the tenth underground level. Actually, they may have seen dead prisoners before, but the state of that one was clear enough, the stench emanating from the cell was one of a decomposing body. After this, they pressed on even more. Sometimes, they found oddities in prisoners. On the seventh level, they had seen a whimpering wolf, and on the twelfth, a young man who looked at them intently, fangs showing and hunger etched on his face. The complete silence, which had started at level nine, was foreboding at best. After level fifteen, almost all cells contained only remains, and the smell became less charged with decay, only dust.

They reached the nineteenth level easily, and stopped there. The opposing stairs were going up, not down. Knowing that his real job had just started, Moody began to inspect each and every cell with his magical eye, and stopped on one. The others had been in front of it already, gawking at the sight.

In front of them was a very old man, the oldest they could have met, judging by the length and snowy nature of his facial hair. He was emaciated, and he was lying in his straw bed, barely breathing but alive.

Not having time for idle chit-chat, and judging the man too frail to move anyway, they continued to inspect the cells, not noticing that Ron was still looking at the man with his jaw hanging. Nothing out of the ordinary could be found, even with Moody's magical eye. They were ready to go up to check if they had forgotten a passageway, when they noticed that Ron was still looking at the cells. The teenager had moved, and wasn't staring the old man anymore. He was now looking pointedly at the cell on the left of the old man's.

Having been briefed about his possible usefulness in the mission, his twin brothers went to him.

"Ron?"

"Hmmm?" he answered, without looking at them.

"What are you looking at?"

He didn't answer, and they looked at the cell, trying to understand what held him. All the prison cells were made in the same way: they were all closed by three dank stone walls and bars on the fourth. In some cells, the prisoners had decorated the walls, but that was rare, because of the distressing effect of the Azkaban prison wardens. In each cell, there was a straw bed, a stone basin in the wall which always contained water, and a hole in the floor. This cell wasn't different. The only strange thing about it was its size. Similar to the old man's one, it was a bit smaller than most other cells, but they had already seen cells this small in the prison, so it hadn't come to their mind.

Still not understanding their brother, they tried to follow his line of sight. He was looking at the straw bed, where a skeleton laid, its bones neatly cleaned by the prison rats. The skeleton wasn't different from the other ones either. While Fred continued to look around the cell to try to find how Ron could be interested in it, George went to Moody, who was still discussing the mission with the two Aurors.

"Sir?" Fred asked politely. After all, Alastor Moody was an impressive sight for a teenager, and even with their mischievous nature, the twins knew that the mission was serious.

"Yes, son?"

"Ron is looking at something but we can't see why."

"I'll be right there."

They went to the other two, and Fred pointed at the bed. Using his eye again, Moody stared at the skeleton and the bed itself, and emitted a sharp laugh, more resembling a bark.

The other ones were first unnerved by the sound, but recovered soon enough to ask the same question. "What is it?"

Moody shook his head, muttering "I should have known." He looked at them and explained.

“When I looked the cells earlier, I was looking for passages through the walls, like on the train stations where we mingle with muggles.” At the twins’ wondering look, he elaborated. “Platform 9¾. I wasn’t ready for that. It’s a hidden trapdoor.”

He magically opened the cell door, and banished the skeleton and the bed in the other side of the cell. Using his magical eye to discern the invisible trapdoor handle, he opened it, revealing a set of stairs. Nymphadora Tonks was left in the cell to guard the way, and the others followed Moody. They descended the stairs, and found themselves in a dark corridor, barely lit by phosphorescent lichen on the walls.

“Lumos.”

The raspy voice of Moody had almost whispered the spell, but the sound was echoed endlessly in the empty corridor. Even now that they had light, they could only see farther, but the sight was the same. On each side of the passage, numerous dark alcoves were displaying the same strange device. It looked like a spiked cloth hanger, with a hose attached on top of it. The hosepipes were attached to a tube which lined the main corridor, which end was still plunged into darkness. The alcoves were approximately three feet wide for eight feet high, almost the same height as the corridor itself. If they had doors, one could have thought of them as torture cells.

Wary of the setting, they advanced cautiously. After two hundred yards of walking, they saw the end of the corridor, which was closed by a double door, decorated with two serpents. They tried to open it, but the door resisted even their best magical attempts.

They prepared to go back, when Ron surprised them all by walking to the door and speaking like no one ever heard him speak before.

“SshaSshen.”

The word echoed in the empty corridor, but nothing happened. The twins went to grab him, but Moody beat them to it.

“What are you doing, lad?”

His answer, though, surprised them. “I may not have the proper accent, but I heard it before. I can do it. Sshaishensh!”

They still didn’t understand what he meant, and he spent two more tries before the twins’ eyes lit with remembrance. Gathering the others away from their little brother, they explained about Harry’s parselmouth ability and Ron’s presence at almost each of its manifestation. While they were doing so, Ron shouted the word a last time, and it echoed in the whole corridor before a click could be heard behind the doors. The serpents guarding the doors spoke something unrecognisable in return, and the passage opened.

What came to their eyes, though, wasn’t what they initially envisioned. They had thought of another prison cell, or a room with the sought after helmet on a pedestal. On the twentieth level underground, they had never imagined finding a room with a window lit by moonlight, nor the room appearing to contain everything one could need to live and study. Numerous books and items lined the wall-mounted shelves. They looked around in search for a helmet, when Moody remembered the message from Dumbledore. Closing his real eye again, he inspected the room. He wasn’t surprised to notice that the window was an illusion, although a very advanced and powerful one. He turned around and finally noticed the helmet high on a shelf. Focusing on it with his real eye, he chuckled upon finding that it was disguised as a wig.

During his search, the twins were looking around as if they had entered the vault of the infamous Marauders, their idols. They started to touch to everything while Moody was looking elsewhere, the other Auror assisting him, and Ron oblivious again.

Crash!

The sound wasn’t one you should expect, nor welcome, in a wizard’s private study.

Whirling around, wands drawn, the two Aurors were surprised to notice that Fred was holding two books while George had several potions in his hands. Unfortunately, he had wanted to grasp one too many and one of them had crashed on the floor, splashing his feet. The Aurors cleaned him frantically, in case it was something acid or equally damaging, but it wasn't.

The mission was urgent, so they were to return to Hogwarts as soon as the helmet was found. However, the room was full of possibly interesting items and books, and, with the threat of Voldemort coming there, they couldn't leave them there. Alastor Moody, after scolding the clumsy twins, took his decision. He gave the helmet and the return portkey to Ron and them, telling them to go back swiftly, without dallying. They nodded, and, grasping the item, spoke the activation word.

Once they were gone, Moody took his reduced trunk out of his pocket, and enlarged it. With the other Auror, they then stored everything they could take a hold of inside, books and items alike, but separating the dark ones from the others using one of the old Auror's dark detectors. While doing so, Moody explained to the other man that they were to come back with a portkey too, although through multiple steps, as they couldn't make a portkey to Hogwarts themselves. In that way, they wouldn't have to encounter any dark wizard.

One of the interesting items looked like a pensieve, but was way bigger than a regular one, equalling in size a barrel. It also wasn't made of stone but of a black and unknown material, and its content wasn't silvery but ashen. When removing the heavy object from the floor, they noticed the flexible pipe loosely attached to it, and followed its path with their eyes. They then remarked that it was connected to the pipe from the corridor.

The pensieve-like furniture item also didn't have a lid. Thankfully, Moody's trunk, like most enlarged trunks, had its own magical equivalent of a gravity field, and everything put inside was safe against the trunk's rough handling. After all, the man had been an Auror, and such feature could be the only difference between a mission's success and failure.

After storing everything manageable in the trunk, Moody reduced it again and they left the room. What stayed behind was mostly the furniture and paintings.

And a splash of unknown potion on the floor.

The two Aurors went through the corridor, and arrived in the cell...

...where they got a little surprise.

Tonks was outside of the cell, slumped against the stump of the wall separating the cell with the trapdoor and the old man's. She was apparently asleep. After closing the trapdoor, moving the bed on it, and closing the cell door again, they proceeded to wake her. Once awake, she told them that she had just felt the need to take a nap, and, despite being wrong to do that while on a guard duty, they didn't say anything more. Telling her that the others left in advance, Moody produced one of his own portkeys, and they grasped it. After being pulled through space into the Auror Headquarters, they would be able to reach Hogwarts through a secure Floo connection.

When the three Aurors were gone, the lying old man opened his eyes. He sat and stirred, his old bones creaking, before taking something from the straw mattress he had been lying on. Bringing the item in front of his eyes, he smiled. There, in his right hand, he was grasping a wand.

Hogwarts, yet again...

To say that the defenders were outnumbered was an understatement. To say that they had been surprised by the roar was an understatement. But, to say that they had been inspired to see the regal beast unceremoniously landing in their midst and joining their ranks was the understatement of the year. The Patronus charms flared again and contributed to push the Dementors back towards the grounds, while the winged lion was tearing through their ranks as if it was butter. His only goal was Ginny Weasley, but she had been far from him from the start. He didn't acknowledge his impact on the Dementors, though, nor their lack of effect on him. After all, he knew

next to nothing from these beasts, even if he was now close enough to register their non-human appearance. He also didn't see the reactions of the witnesses, especially from one bearded old man who arrived after him, intending to verify what his observers were telling him.

Gabriel was feeling happier than ever to have found her again, and the wretched creatures couldn't distress him fast enough so that he'd forget that. His massive paws had their claws out, and each time he touched a Dementor, he unconsciously released a blast of lightning. Each time, the creature shrieked horribly before collapsing. From the lipless mouth of some of the fallen Dementors, a white mist could be witnessed, taking one or several little humanoid forms. Some of these ghost-like apparitions dissipated, while some others left the place quickly, most of those heading south. Most of the spirits, though, stayed there, floating around while seeming to search for something. The result was understood rapidly, as these spirits swiftly joined the body of the Kissed defenders. These defenders whose soul had been sucked away found it back, and rose from their catatonic form, before joining the fray again. From his bleeding state on top of the stairs leading to the hospital wing, Neville yelled in happiness at seeing Parvati sitting up again, and his Patronus flared to life again, helping the others in driving the accursed creatures away.

Upon reaching his target, Gabriel noticed that a Dementor was letting her slide on the floor, lifeless like a dropped puppet, and a wave of fury came upon him. How could these abominations do that to her? He lifted his massive head to the ceiling, and roared so loudly that the nearest humans brought their hands to their ears. Unconsciously, in his seething state, he also released a shockwave large enough to encompass the whole foyer.

People near him were shocked unconscious, while others farther were merely dazed from the wave. The Dementors, though, didn't have the same reaction. The three ranks of Dementors nearest to him flopped on the ground at the same time, and began to release the misty spirits like their already fallen comrades had done before.

Unbeknownst to everybody, the roar also made several creatures nearby raise their head and start to attack the lock of their cage

frantically. Once opened, they went outside, stirred their powerful body, and extended their wings. The next moment, they were in the air.

In the literally shocked pause that followed the lion's outburst, most of the released spirits went to the Kissed defenders, but Gabriel didn't know that. He hadn't noticed what had happened before, and didn't see that one of these spirits went to Ginny. He didn't see the awestruck expressions around him. He only knew about his pain about her. After licking her face, he rose and charged madly in the remaining Dementors, bodily pushing a few of them outside...

...where the Death Eaters were stationed, asking themselves what had caused the ruckus and the roars. Upon seeing the massive winged beast running towards them at full speed, though, they could barely react in time and a few of them got butchered by the massive paws and jaws. At the same time, a bird cry sounded from above them.

They ignored it. Death Eaters aren't generally concerned with bird cries.

Wrong move.

The four hippogriffs that Hagrid had obtained for his Care of Magical Creatures course had freed themselves upon hearing the angry shout of their cousin. Almost every magical creature with feathery wings originated from the mighty primeval eagles, thus the griffin, golden griffin, and hippogriff were cousin. The hippogriffs didn't have claws, though, but their hind hooves and talons were more than enough to inflict severe damage to the ranks of Death Eaters. Of the fifty-odd dark wizards, eight died and four more were wounded in the first seconds of the winged creatures' assault.

After the initial shock, though, the wizards fought for their lives, and released a volley of damaging spells towards the creatures. Most of them were aimed toward the golden griffin, who took the brunt force of three explosions and four cutting curses. The regal animal roared again, and only got the opportunity to slash at two of them before falling unconscious due to the number of curses withstood.

When he subsequently disappeared, the Death Eaters weren't quite happy, as they suspected more magic at work, and they didn't want to face the beast again. They couldn't do anything about it, though, and still had to defend against the other winged creatures. The hippogriffs, though, quite wounded too, weren't in the need of a death fight. Once the golden griffin had disappeared, they disengaged from the fight, and took off, barely escaping a last volley of curses.

Albus Dumbledore had watched the scene in fascination, as, even in his longer-than-most life, he had never witnessed something like that. If his instruments had been true, the legendary winged animal had arrived in the castle at the same place that the boy that he had already sensed, and could very well be the same. The way the lion had moved towards Miss Weasley, and reacted at her fall, was also a clear indication about his feelings for her. However, when the lion charged outside and was targeted by several spells, he could only wince in frustration that he couldn't help it apart from a few spells here and there.

Upon seeing the lion disappear, though, he understood that he had had a rescue plan already prepared, and was certainly 'licking his wounds' somewhere safe. The hippogriffs had been useful too, he thought. He also hoped that they will be fine afterwards, as he wanted to thank the fierce beasts himself. Beside him, the large form of Hagrid relaxed. The half-giant had been awed by the winged lion as well, and had been fidgety during the fight with the animals, moaning about those dark wizards harming his 'gentle' creatures.

Dumbledore rolled his eyes, before reflecting about the ever-elusive boy again. He still had no confirmation about his identity, but had a really good insight about it now. If only he could find him!

He had more urgent matters at hand, though, as the remaining Dementors were regrouping outside of the gates, preparing for another charge. Like all other defenders, he prepared himself to cast a Patronus, while others, looking at the Death Eaters for any attacking sign, prepared themselves to cast magical shields around the defenders.

It was then that he got a message from Professor McGonagall, who had stayed in the Headmistress' office to gather intelligence. The expedition from Azkaban was back, and they were successful.

He decided to cast his best shield around the bigger group of people, before going back to the Battle Room, closely followed by Hermione. Even if the girl was knowledgeable enough to do her task in a battle, her current interest was to follow the aged wizard to verify her research theories about Dementors, especially after having told the old wizard about Snape's conclusion while running down here. She had already verified Severus' previous information, thanks to the winged lion, that the creatures were wary of electricity, but she didn't know how to bring electricity in the magic-filled castle. Her favourite book had repeated, once and again, that modern muggle appliances couldn't function in there. She was reflecting about bringing a generator on the grounds, when they entered the office.

The three redheads from the Azkaban mission group were there, and Fred had a wig in his hand. George was trying to calm Ron, who was bouncing up and down, asking the same question over and over.

"Where is he? I know he was in the castle, so, where is he?"

Hermione extrapolated that, and, remembering the alley episode, understood that the agitated teenager wasn't speaking about any teacher or student. To the astonishment of people around them, she addressed Ron, trying to calm him.

"He was here, Ron. He helped us. Ginny fell," seeing the worried faces of the three Weasleys, she quickly added "but she's fine now. He saw that and destroyed many Dementors in one go, before charging outside. After being hit by several curses, he fell on the ground and disappeared."

Ron was a bit calmer now. "Good. So his escape route is working again. I wish..." he continued by mumbling something, before falling into silence again.

During the exchange, Fred and Dumbledore had gone into a short discussion about the wig and the other artefacts in the room, and the fact that Moody was to come later with them in tow. The old man then took the wig, sat on his favourite armchair, and put it on.

Having nothing to do, the twins ask the Headmistress to tell them about the battle, and Hermione listens while the old teacher recounts that the Death Eaters had taken the Quidditch pitch and were now attacking the Entrance Hall with Dementors.

Upon hearing that the terrain where they play their favourite sport was held by Death Eaters, the twins looked at each other in their unnerving wordless way, before smiling. They then left the room, while the Headmistress merely nodded, taken by the representation of another Dementor charge in the Entrance Hall. Hermione was looking at the pale face of Dumbledore, and Ron was at the window, so nobody took real notice of their leave.

The shower of spells that had struck the foyer a short time after Dumbledore's leaving was unlike the previous ones. Up to that time, the whole bunch of Death Eaters had sent explosions and cutting curses, intending to do much visual damage to lower the defenders' ability to cast the Patronus charm. Now, though, after having noticed the drop in the Dementor numbers and the loss in their own ranks due to the winged lion charge, they went for the killing.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Not all of them could cast the infamous spell, though, so it was around a dozen green lights which went into the foyer, haphazardly targeting groups of defenders. Unfortunately, no shield was able to block it, so four defenders fell on the ground, already lifeless. The other targets had either conjured an item in the spell way, had dodged it, or it had simply been badly aimed.

Seeing this, the defenders tried to find cover from the onslaught, but the scramble was such that two other volleys of the death spell found targets more easily. A dozen defenders fell again, students as well as some teachers. In this mess however, something happened that only a few observers noticed.

Dumbledore's teams of spies from the younger years were always at their post, undetected by the attackers because of their apparent but ordered lack of response. Even if nobody in the entrance hall was able to look outside, they could. And they noticed that the tall redhead there, who had successfully brought the castle wards down, and who had been hidden in the group of black robes since then, had advanced towards the castle with his wand raised, before turning towards the Death Eaters. Only the black-robed wizards could notice Bill Weasley's face, and some tried to take cover, knowing that the man knew many dangerous spells. The pain brought by his disobedience thwarted his spellcasting, though, and he fell on all fours, panting. Behind their masks, the Death Eaters smirked, satisfied of their master's hold on the man, and they went into position to continue their casting of the deadly Unforgivable.

Looking back in the castle, Bill saw his sister, running to take cover like the other defenders. His mind, torn between two outcomes, snapped free at that moment, and he could only jerk his face towards the Death Eaters, who had just uttered the last syllable of the incantation. Taking the only available decision, Bill mobilized all his strength, and jumped in the way of the menacing green lights.

The action saved most of the intended targets, as he caught eight of the green rays, the other four being so badly aimed that they struck at the castle structure. The action hadn't been lost to the defenders, though, and Ron, looking from the Headmistress' office windows, saw his fallen brother. His few words, though, mumbled as they were, weren't noticed by the room occupants, even if some powers took note of them.

"We did not have time to speak lately, brother mine, and I know we could have sought after you better. I hope that you will find solace in your last home. Go in peace, now, you are forgiven."

After Bill's sacrifice, some of the most talented wizards among the defenders tried to retaliate, sending their own spells towards the Death Eaters from behind their cover. Some dark wizards fell to the ground, and some got badly cut. Some got a working shield up before the spell hit them, and some others merely dodged the incoming spell.

Having joined the fray, Minerva McGonagall, as a Transfiguration expert, transformed a pile of rubble into a large feline in the form of the winged lion previously seen, before animating it to go against the dark wizards. The idea got into the mind of some of her best students, and soon, some running stone animals could be seen charging the ranks of the black-robed wizards outside. That action required concentration, though, as, even if they animated the stone, they couldn't give it free will.

The Death Eaters, afraid at first of the newly appeared winged lion, began to retreat, casting spells at the animated creature. Seeing that their spells had no more effect than denting the stone, they ran away, to be quickly replaced, in front of the entrance, by the Dementors. That move disrupted the concentration of the creators of the animated stone animals, and said animals stopped to move.

Even if the Dementors had lost a few of them because of the golden griffin, they were still a group of one hundred and sixty soul-sucking creatures, and that brought some fear to the defenders. Courage and bravery soon replaced the fear, as the Gryffindors intoned the hymn of Hogwarts, seconded by all the other defenders.

As the Dementors began to charge, numerous silvery animals erupted from the defenders wands. Even if they were fewer than before, they were brighter, and pushed the attack back to the grounds. But the dark creatures were relentless, and, after a few charges, the Patronus began to falter. The Death Eaters had regrouped also, and even the few curses directed their way from the defenders weren't strong enough to push them away. Even if the defenders clung to their happy memories to maintain their Patronus charms active, they felt that their last hour had just begun. Even the new defenders arriving from the Headmistress' office weren't much against the attacking force. On top of that, when Tonks tried to cast a Patronus, nothing happened. Dumbfounded, she tried again, unsuccessfully again, and was going to be targeted by several spells when her colleague pushed her on the ground, before retreating somewhat.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know! Lumos!”

Nothing happened, and she looked at him in doubt. “Lend me your wand for a second.”

He complied, looking warily around and ducking debris falling from an explosion curse. Using his wand, she cast the Light spell again, this time successfully. Her eyes went wide, and she looked at her own wand in surprise. He pushed her out of the way of some other debris, and she shook herself awake. No need to ponder uselessly while on a battlefield. She returned his wand, and, storing hers in her holster, she did something that many Aurors had to do due to their profession. She drew her secondary wand. After testing it successfully with a Light spell again, she joined the fray once more, quickly followed by her colleague.

Fred and George ran in the now desert corridors, an unusually serious expression on their face. The only witness of their run was one of the inner spy groups, made of first year Hufflepuffs. Noticing the twins’ look, they thought that the infamous duo had been dispatched for a mission, and thus didn’t disturb the Battle Room with information about them.

When they started Hogwarts, the Weasley twins had had inner information from their older brothers, and had taken upon themselves to explore the castle thoroughly. Only afterwards did they find the Marauders’ map. That’s how they could navigate the corridors until they reached a seemingly blank panel between two Quidditch trophy showcases.

“Fair play.”

The password for the flying instructor and Quidditch referee was always the same, and the twins entered the rooms warily. They weren’t sure that the teacher hadn’t booby-trapped the room since their last visit.

Seeing that nothing untoward had happened, they headed for the Quidditch additional supplies, an evil gleam in their eyes.

Tom Marvolo Riddle wasn't happy. It was such a common occurrence nowadays that, were he actually living in his own body, he would have ulcer problems. His attack plan had been thrown back time and again. Firstly, the wards hadn't been really down when they had arrived. Secondly, the castle defenders were numerous, and he suspected Dumbledore to have recruited students. Thirdly, the Dementors have been pushed back again and again, as if there was an endless supply of Patronuses. And lastly...

He couldn't even wrap his mind around it. A golden griffin? He had already tortured to unconsciousness the follower who had brought him the bad news, and, although he wanted to vent his fury by killing him, he knew that he couldn't do that unless he wanted to have one less follower. And his number of followers was going to be his first problem soon. Again.

The Dark Lord knew that the Dementors were pounding the entrance, but they didn't go as fast as he had wanted them. He was thinking about how to strike quick and hard, when he was struck himself. Quick and hard. He possessed someone's body, which meant that he couldn't feel the pain, but he had distinctly heard the sound of bones cracking in his arm. Looking around, he couldn't see much in the surrounding darkness, which made the next near-invisible Bludger strike home again, breaking some ribs and sending him on the muddy ground.

The twins' plan was to repeat Dobby's performance on Harry. The only difficulty was to charm the bronze balls without being able to direct them afterwards. Before launching them, they had noticed that a Death Eater was going from the Entrance Hall battlefield, supposedly to report to his master. The teens had smirked, knowing that they were going to strike home. Opening a window, they had released the two reserve Bludgers, charmed to hunt anything moving in the pitch.

Sprawled on the soil in an undignified heap for such a powerful being, Voldemort was seething, but couldn't concentrate on one opponent, as he distinctly heard several zooming sounds around him. He knew that staying there was going to be difficult, and he didn't want to be seen by his followers in this state, nor being targeted by the

defenders while in this enfeebled state, so he took the only way out: he Apparated to his cottage.

When Fred and George, through a vision enhancing spell, noticed that the Bludgers stopped moving, they high-fived and left towards the Battle Room. Even if it had started as a prank, their action had proved successful, even if they didn't know the exact extent of it, and they had to report. Besides, they had to tell their side not to go in the pitch without disabling the Bludgers first.

The people in the Headmistress' office were in confusion. The ones managing the battle were at a loss about what to do now, and unsuccessfully hoped that the winged lion would appear again. The Weasley twins had left already, supposedly towards the battlefield, and Ron was slumped against the window.

Alastor Moody had arrived through the chimney, quickly followed by Tonks and the other Auror. On his signal, they had left towards the entrance hall, and he went to Dumbledore, ready to report.

The old professor, seconded by some teachers, with Hermione tagging along, was looking at the wig in disappointment and some anger. The helmet hidden under the illusion, supposed to be the Commanding Helm of the Dementors, wasn't working. Well... it was, to a point. Dumbledore was able to see the Dementors in his mind, but, trying to express his will through it hadn't worked at all, as the battle ruckus and fight reports from downstairs indicated it. There have been very few persons willing to put the wig-helmet on, as everyone was still unsure of the dark nature of the item, and nobody wanted the responsibility of immersing themselves in the Dark Arts. Most of the members of the Order present had tried it on, though, although for a shorter time than Dumbledore, and the result had been the same. Hermione, thinking about it, could come to two different conclusions: either the Dark Lord had forbidden the Dementors from obeying anyone from the Order of the Phoenix, or they just couldn't use the helmet. Looking at the wig, she felt the need to try it herself. After all, she had been the one with the original idea to communicate with the creatures, and she had pushed her research in that direction for the whole year. She had also helped Severus Snape with the actual discussion with the Dementor, and felt privy to something the

others were not. She looked at the aged Professor, and addressed him tentatively.

“Sir?”

He turned towards her, still frowning. “Yes?”

“I have a suggestion, sir.” She paused, unsure of the assembled people’s possible reaction.

Dumbledore, though, recognized an inspired Hermione when he saw one, and smiled benignly to her. “Speak up, Hermione. Any idea is food for our mill.”

She looked at him with a twinkle of her own in her eyes. “I think you are mixing metaphors, sir. Anyways... let’s imagine we are Voldemort for a moment.” At that, the others apart from Dumbledore looked uneasy, and the old man seemed plainly curious. He nodded at her to continue.

“I think that, all battle orders aside, the first thing he’d have ordered them is something to prevent you or anyone they know from the Order of the Phoenix from taking their control again.” Seeing the light of understanding in the old Professor’s eyes, she continued sheepishly. “If I may... I did the research and documented Professor Snape’s discussions. Beside you, Professor, I think I’m the most indicated to get to them efficiently.”

Albus Dumbledore sighed. He had never wanted to put his students at risk, but now, there was a fight going on downstairs, and many young lives were at stake. He reluctantly gave the item to Hermione, who received it in trembling hands. The old man could only give her short instructions before she put it on her head.

“Just order them off the battle, don’t stay too long.”

The feeling in the helmet was eerie, and she could have spent days exploring the tortuous global mind of the numerous creatures. However, she had a limited time, and tried to think of a few things first.

The first and foremost one was to stop their attacks on the school. She sensed that, after having evaluated that she could be obeyed, they cooperated, and saw, in the global mind's eye, that most of the Dementors were now standing motionless, only moving on their own accord to flee the still active Patronus charms. Wanting to verify her success in ordering them, she removed the helmet, and met the curious gaze of Dumbledore. Before they could utter anything, though, the communication devices erupted in cheers about the new lack of aggressiveness from the Dementors. She nodded to Dumbledore and smiled in victory, before putting the helmet again. She had much to do.

At first, she had to launch the creatures on the still attacking Death Eaters. No need to lose anymore defenders. She shared the thought of attacking black-robed wizards with a white mask on sight, and sensed that the Dementors, apparently devoid of real free will, complied with any suggestion given to their global mind. Taking advantage of her direct link with the Dementor mind, she inspected the memories of recent orders given to them. She then saw, in the mind's eye, Severus Snape discussing with one, and an unknown woman ordering the Hogwarts attack. The woman seemed in pain, but her orders were clearer than those of Snape. Next to her, though, a man with a strange head seemed happy. She suspected that it was Voldemort himself, and shuddered internally.

Bracing herself, she planted orders in the mind to disregard any interaction with Voldemort, the woman, or any other black-robed wizard or witch. It seemed the most logical thing to do, as she didn't have memories of their individual faces. She smiled, thinking that Snape would have to change clothes before giving orders to them, now. In complete control of the mind, now, she also removed the order about disregarding Dumbledore, and went to remove the helmet, before stopping her movement. The mind was hers to explore, and it contained a long account of unwritten History! Even if it was limited by the Dementors' field of action, she sensed that she could learn many interesting things through it. She also sensed that the helmet protected her from the hideous aspect of their memories.

The Dementors were going against the Death Eaters, now, and she saw, through the mind's eye again, that the black robes, initially with a smug stance, quickly lost their wits as one, then two of them got Kissed. They fled the premises through portkeys, one of them having the presence of mind to grasp the fallen body of Bill Weasley before doing so. The other dead Death Eaters were already decaying on the spot. Voldemort, knowing that there were spells to make the dead speak, had long since forced each of his followers to drink a potion which made the body decomposition much faster. Even if he knew that Dumbledore wasn't going to go into Necromancy anytime soon, he didn't want to take a risk. That fact, at the origin of the first name of the Death Eaters, wasn't known by many, but that was to change as all the students and teachers could smell the unbearable stench permeating the air.

To be continued in next chapter: Fifth Column...

It's fun to write a battle.  
But you want some more tattle?  
This scene closure will come soon,  
It you review, it's a boon.

## Chapter 24 – Fifth Column

Tamara O'Malley was standing, annoyed, in Gabriel's rooms. Her memories were unclear on how she had arrived there, but she had recognised them quite quickly. That is, after the person she had been kicking at had disappeared. It was Gabriel's hideaway, so it must have been Gabriel. He looked strange, though, with his golden hair and green eyes... and he had a pair of wings, too!

She definitely had to ask him a few questions, but he had left for an unknown location, letting her rot in there. She wasn't exactly stranded, as she had her own means of moving around, but she didn't want to be asked too uncomfortable questions after he'd come back with her absent from there. She had had time to explore the rooms, trying to entertain herself by reading the indecipherable books, unsuccessfully trying to lift the metal bar, and eating a few snacks from the plate.

She also had time to ponder about why they had appeared here in the first time, and shuddered, as she remembered the scuffle on the school roof, and the feeling of falling. Gabriel had saved her, then? But he left her here... when she had attacked him. She sat on the chair, taking her head in her hands, and sighed.

It was in her lost state that she heard the bed creaking suddenly. Jumping at the sound, she found herself frozen at the sight. An enormous lion had appeared on the bed. The animal was on its side, facing her, and looked like it had been badly beaten, as it was bleeding profusely on the white linens. She was surprised, then, to see the bed react to the injured animal, and tend its wounds with as much care as a professional medic.

She was still staring at the animal when the bed finished its treatment, the wounds closed and healing. The lion then sighed and turned in its sleep.

That's when the girl got one of the biggest shocks of her life.

The animal had wings. The lion had wings! Exactly like Gabriel's drawings!

She reflected that she didn't have anywhere to hide from the beast, should it be a ferocious one. After all, it still had blood on its maw and paws, and it hadn't been healed by the bed so it must have been from some other animal. Or was it a human?

Unsure about all this, she decided to hide in the curtain-separated bathroom. But, as she didn't want to be forgotten should Gabriel come, she awkwardly wrote a note with the inked feather she had found in the drawer, the note saying where to find her.

When she finished writing, she turned towards the beast a last time, and saw that it was soundly asleep, recovering from its wounds. She took a few cushions from the sports room, and went into the bathroom. Her watch showed that it was past dinnertime, so she decided to take a little nap.

She slept uncomfortably, but couldn't very well push the lion away from the bed, could she?

After a few hours, she woke up, alerted by a sound. With the closed curtain, she could only hear the sounds from the other room. The lion was trashing in the bed, growling menacingly. She retreated in the shower stall, trying to hide herself a bit more, but the beast's breathing became regular again, and she went back to the cushions and her uncomfortable sleep.

A few hours afterwards, she heard another strange sound, and woke up completely, quickly alert. At first, it was a deep rasping sound, which slowly evolved into human-produced sobs. Unable to stand it, she went silently to the room, and saw Gabriel, sitting on the edge of the bed, crying in his crossed arms. She went to him, and patted his back gently. When he raised his head, she saw the sorrow in his eye, and hugged him. After five minutes, during which the sobs changed into sighs, they separated. They softly spoke, at the same time.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

Looking at each other, they smiled slightly. He spoke first.

“I’m certainly a wizard.”

“You are?”

“If you hadn’t noticed, I can change my appearance.”

“I noticed. So the winged lion...”

“...yep, that’s me. Sorry to have frightened you. I didn’t know it before, though. You wanted to sleep?”

“It’s okay; I took a quick nap on some cushions. I couldn’t very well push you, and I didn’t see myself in bed with a big burly lion.”

“You took a nap? How much time...” he suddenly looked panicked. “What time is it? When did I arrive?”

She looked at her watch and answered. “You slept for a good six hours.”

He closed his eyes, muttering something and wiggling his fingers. Uneasy about that, thinking that the wizard in front of her was casting a spell, she asked warily. “What are you doing?”

He opened his eye and looked at her, before understanding the question. “Calculating the time outside. I have to go back.”

“Oh. Go back? Why would you want to go back to some place where you got injured?”

“She’s dead, I saw her fall, there!” at that, he began to cry again, and he continued, haltingly “I have... to find... her body.”

She nodded, not wanting to force more sobs by asking who was dead, and took a decision. “I’m coming with you.”

“What? No way! From what I saw, it was a full-scale battle, you can’t come.”

“A battle? Where?”

“I don’t know! But you are not coming!”

“I can hold my own in a battle! If I can use some fire, I mean...”

He reflected for a while, understanding her dilemma, before agreeing, albeit reluctantly. After all, in the fight he had been into, spells had flown in the air, so, more or less fire...

He wanted to transform as soon as they arrive, though, and warned her about that. She touched the ring, and he spoke the activation word again.

“Hogliewarts.”

In a dark cottage...

“Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!”

The spirit-man was furious. There had been times when he had been angry, but now, he was seething. Each and every one of his followers got an idea of his real proficiency in casting the Cruciatus curse.

“How could such a simple plan fail? You had two hundred Dementors to your side and you lost to mere students?”

“My Lord...”

“Silence! Crucio!”

The unfortunate follower spent longer in the throes of the pain curse than the others, and when Voldemort stopped, he fell into unconsciousness, some blood coming from his bitten tongue. The dark lord looked at him in disgust, before addressing the others. At least, he seemed calmer now.

“We are going to regroup. No one leaves this house before I tell you so. Jugson!”

“Yes, my Lord?” the sleep-deprived man had already spent his entire week browsing through old books and napping in the cottage’s library.

“If you don’t have news about the spell, I’m going to-”

“You are not.”

The androgyne that Voldemort already knew as Thirteen had just appeared near the throne. Before Voldemort could react one way or another, said androgyne gave him a scroll of parchment.

“Is this of any interest for you?” he muttered so low that only Voldemort heard him, before disappearing.

The currently self-appointed Dark Lord grabbed the scroll and began to read. When he was halfway, he was smiling, and when he finished, he looked happier than ever. He held the scroll to his most faithful servant.

“Jugson, here is the spell. Prepare it, quickly. We will use this one’s blood.” He finished his sentence by pushing with his foot the dead body of Bill Weasley.

When everyone was ready to leave, a deep voice came from behind Voldemort’s diminished ranks of followers.

“You will need me for that spell.”

A man had just appeared in the room. He was undoubtedly old, although closely shaved and well-dressed in a black and silver robe. A silver staff helped him to walk towards the Dark Lord.

“You are Voldemort?” he asked, looking him up and down.

“I’m the Dark Lord Voldemort, and show respect if you don’t want to die!”

The other man chuckled, before mumbling something unrecognisable. If Voldemort had been a tad closer, he could have heard “youngsters.” He straightened, and spoke again. “I’m the only one able to cast this spell, as the power level required is too high for any of your followers.” he said with contempt in his voice.

Voldemort sneered. “What about me?”

“You?” The old man’s sneer, polished by experience, was as impressing as his, if not more. “You are the spell target! You can’t do both.”

Voldemort thought about it. On the one hand, he could now have his own body to get rid of his current stinking flesh. On the other hand, he was putting himself under the man’s influence. Strangely, when he reflected about it, it didn’t disturb him anymore than that. Thinking about the failed attack again, he remembered the strange sensation of being watched from the castle, as if... as if it recognized him. Shrugging the feeling aside, he smiled. The sight of his broken body smiling in a broken way wasn’t pleasant, but he didn’t care. In a short time, he will be whole again!

Earlier, in the Great Hall...

As soon as Dumbledore left with all the volunteers, all the doors of the Great Hall sealed themselves shut. The students began worrying about their fate, but some of them were hard-headed enough to recognise their situation. As they hadn’t wanted to fight, they were going to be protected by the others. They calmed the other and mostly younger students, and the students organized themselves quite rapidly.

The elves summoned privacy walls and couches, so some of the students slept a bit. Some of them, who had had their school bags with them in the room, shared their books to provide some

entertainment. Some older students told the frightened first years stories about the school and Dumbledore.

They were under siege, but were trying to stay calm.

In the peaceful atmosphere, though, a few people were restless.

Most of the volunteers had been from Gryffindor, sending fifty out of seventy students in the battle. They were followed in numbers by Hufflepuff, then by Ravenclaw, and Slytherin had barely produced half a dozen fighters, and fourteen spies. That meant that the numbers in the Great Hall were reversed, and in favour of the Slytherins. The fact that two adults were there wasn't changing anything, as the elderly man who had joined them was sleeping already, and professor Sinistra didn't have enough charisma to direct the students into anything.

Pansy Parkinson wanted to use this opportunity to wreak havoc on the feeble students. That way, she would certainly rise in power in the ranks of the future ruler of the world.

“Vince! Greg!” she called from inside one of the temporary bedrooms.

“Mmhpfmm mrhmm!” answered Vincent Crabbe, who had always been the most eloquent of the pair. During the intellectual moments where they had to open their mouths, it was generally Crabbe who answered, and the other one nodded stupidly. Still, now that snacks had appeared on the tables, both Pansy's sidekicks had lunged on them and were now sporting a full mouth and food-laden arms. Not quite useful to hold a proper conversation.

Pansy rolled her eyes. That wasn't going to be easy. Anyway, they didn't have to say anything right now, so she spoke again.

“Remember what we discussed a week ago?” Noticing their vacant eyes, she sighed, and continued for herself. “Naturally... who would have thought otherwise?”

Goyle showed a spark of genius by speaking before his peer, but the spark was drowned in an ocean immediately. "I don't know... who?"

Pansy sighed again. Twice. "Listen, you two. Starting now, you do exactly as I say. You don't speak without my clearance. You don't eat until I say so. And you don't move if I don't tell you to. Understood?"

They looked at each other, before turning their head toward her with a lost expression. She sighed, again. "Riiight. You may speak now."

"Understood, Pansy!"

"Good boys." She adopted a calculating look and spoke slowly. "You are going to sit with me here. I am going to say several things. Whatever I say, if I finish a sentence with a question to you, you answer it."

"Errr... Pansy? How d'we answer it? We don't have the answer..."

Pansy considered there and then buying herself a wig to replace the hair he will soon tear off herself in frustration. How could those two have even entered Hogwarts, it was a mystery to her. Still, they had their advantages...

Shaking herself, she answered Crabbe. "Simple. When I end a sentence by 'isn't it?' or 'doesn't it?' you answer 'Yeah', loudly but without shouting. If I end one with 'is it?' or 'does it?' you will answer 'Nah.' Let's try it... The weather is beautiful, isn't it?"

"But Pansy, we don't see outside from here, I don't know about the weather!" whined Goyle.

She sighed exasperatedly before retorting. "I don't care if you see the weather or not! Just do as I said. The weather is beautiful, isn't it? You answer 'Yeah'."

"Ah. Err... Yeah?" The profound intelligence of the reply unnerved Pansy greatly, but at last, they should work around her plan, now.

“Go fetch Marcus, now.”

Marcus Flint was captaining the Slytherin Quidditch team. The boy was older than the regular seventh years because he had been allowed to pass his NEWT exams again, after failing them. His parents had used the excuse that last year's events had distressed the young man enough to disturb his exams. The student wasn't recruited as a junior Death Eater yet, but Pansy knew that he was sympathizing with them.

When Marcus came in the privacy stall, he looked uneasily at the trio. Everybody in Slytherin knew that these three students were in league with the Death Eaters. They just didn't know to which extent.

“Hi Marcus, how are you doing today?” asked Pansy. She could be very charming when the need arose.

“Err... good?” The young man didn't know what she had in mind.

“Don't you think that we are too many students in the school?”

“Err... perhaps?”

“We could be more aptly taught if we were fewer in class,” Pansy then looked at Goyle intently, “don't you think?”

The boy understood it was his cue, and answered “Yeah!”

Startled at the interruption, Marcus looked at him, before turning toward the girl again. “Well... yes, I gather.”

“If certain students weren't there at all, if they were prevented from accessing the school, we would be better. Isn't it?”

Taken by the play, Crabbe and Goyle answered at the same time. “Yeah!”

Marcus wasn't so obtuse, though, and he slowly understood where the discussion was leading. Pansy's next sentence confirmed that.

“More than a third of the students here are mud... muggleborn, Marcus. Another third are... come from mixed parentage. We would be better without them, right, Marcus? What do you think about that?”

Marcus shifted uneasily on his seat. That was a question he had already thought about, and he agreed with the principle. He had never voiced his opinion before, however, and was suspecting that Pansy had an ulterior motive to this discussion. He couldn't place it, though, and answered truthfully.

“Well... yes, I suspect that the professors would have more time for each of us. We could learn more things instead of starting with the basics in the first year.”

Pansy smiled internally. She had known about Marcus' tendencies for a long time, and it pleased her that he voiced them at last. He hadn't even need peer pressure or intimidation to agree with them.

“Well, Marcus, we want everybody to know that there will be some changes soon. I know that the attack will succeed. Mere students, especially Gryffindorks,” she smirked, and the three boys' smiles reflected hers, “don't stand a chance against hundreds of Dementors.” She ignored Marcus' gasp and continued. “When the Dark Lord will take over the school, mudbloods will see their right to learn revoked. We don't need them, and we don't want them.” After a second, she added “do we?”

On cue, the three boys answered “No!”

“Good. I want to wreak havoc in this Hall. Once we have enough people agreeing with us, there will be nobody able to stop us. Those two spies will be our first targets, as well as the crumbling old man and the fraud. Then we will treat the mudbloods, half-bloods, and the other muggle-lovers.”

Marcus had a last ray of coherent thought. “What do you want to do with them, exactly?”

She smiled evilly. "You'll see, Marcus. You'll see. I guarantee that you will find the experience most enjoyable. Are you with me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good. We need more people agreeing with us, however." She turned toward her sidekicks again. "Go fetch Montague and Bole."

The process of convincing the Slytherins continued, and soon, Millicent Bulstrode, Theodore Nott, and Adrian Pucey joined the small group. Adrian was a little harder to convince, but the bulging muscles of the Slytherin resident bodyguards, as well as the hard looks of the others, made him agree with the views, and Pansy finished him with a complicated theory where fewer students would be better for the school economics. Nobody was in the right state of mind to contradict her at that point.

After gathering her mini-club of half a dozen followers, the junior dark witch proceeded to the next part of her plan. She told them that all the other Houses were full of those stinking muggle-lovers and that they all deserved to be casualties of the outside attack. Dumbledore and several teachers didn't find grace in their eyes. Her audience nodded along, and occasionally cheered to her ranting. Pansy directed the meeting aptly, and, in a true secret society meeting, she provided them with knives to seal their secrecy in blood. While they sliced each other's forearm with the weapons, she surreptitiously cast a cheering charm to push their mood a little further.

When Terence Higgs, seventh-year Slytherin Prefect, came around the privacy wall to ask for some calm, the overwrought students saw in him the epitome of their ill-advertised enemy, and lunged savagely to him. The poor prefect could only stare in awe at the four hilts protruding from his chest.

Pansy knew that 'her' students had to stay keyed-up for her project, and she galvanized her troops, repeating the false information she had fed them with. She then pushed them in the Hall while pretending to follow. She didn't have time to prevent her sidekicks to follow the group, though, as the two of them had been raptly drinking her words

like the others. She sighed at their stupidity and went back in another privacy stall, laid on a bed, and pretended to sleep, oblivious to the sound of carnage in the Hall proper. Whatever the result of the operation, she wasn't traceable, and would escape unscathed.

In the hall, pandemonium erupted. The eight armed teenagers lunged on the unsuspecting population like the plague, plunging blades to get targets nearby, and casting the most aggressive spell they knew for those remote targets. As the most proficient in fighting had left, the remaining students took a deadly long time to respond to the threat. It wasn't before six students had fallen, along whose the two spies for Dumbledore, that some curses could be seen flying towards the mad students.

The people in the Hall quickly saw that mild curses wouldn't be enough to get the eight Slytherin down, so a volley of miscellaneous object soon flew through the hall towards the attackers. Crabbe got tangled in bed linens, and the other students could approach him to bodily knock him out with improved clubs or furniture.

Four of the would-be dark wizards got hit by curses, the ineffectiveness of these being compensated by their number. Millicent Bulstrode was leg-locked, before being knocked out also. Pucey was subjected to the Petrificus Totalus spell. Montague got hit by an Expelliarmus expertly thrown by an older Hufflepuff student, thus disarming him before he was knocked out by the mob as well. And Goyle was hit by several different curses at the same time, some of which being Transfiguration incantation, and found himself transformed into a strange animal, half-donkey and half-monkey, with the global size of a cat, and a polka dotted fur.

Bole got isolated into a circle of angry young wizards armed with wands and improvised weapons, and found himself beaten to an inch of his life.

From the last two students, Flint stared at the approaching mob in defiance, cursing them verbally before impaling himself on his knife. Nott, the last one, seeing all that mess, his mind screaming at him to wake up, decided to surrender and threw his wand and knife on the

ground. That didn't prevent him from being knocked out as well, though.

In the shocked silence that ensued, everyone went to the fallen, victims of the eight supposedly mad students. Many tears were released upon the nine deceased, and heartening yells upon the wounded. Deciding to show up at that point, but not fool enough to appear unscathed, Pansy first torn her clothing and cut herself on the cheek, before exiting the privacy stall. She then acted like everybody about the general situation. Even if her housemates knew that she was generally untrustworthy, she was so good an actress that everybody thought of her as another victim of the deadly madness.

They had to do something about the wounded, though, but the doors were sealed. Pansy had also counted on the attack to be either swift or long, not repelled. That's why the proud smile she showed when the doors started to open transformed into a disbelieving expression when they saw McGonagall appear on the threshold, smiling.

However, the Headmistress' smile evaporated immediately when she took notice of the state of the Great Hall. Everybody started to speak at the same time, some students wanting to bring the injured to the Hospital wing, and others wanting to relate their own version of the events.

Casting a quick Sonorus on herself, the wizened woman asked for the silence, and got it. In the stillness that followed, she looked around, and noticed that some students had been stabbed and that others were on the floor with knives beside them. Her nostrils flared in anger, but she had to take action immediately.

She pointed to Seamus Finnigan, a trustworthy and athletic third-year Gryffindor. "Go fetch Madam Pomfrey and as many helpers as possible from the infirmary, and ask her to bring lots of her anti-bleeding tape! After this, fetch Professor Dumbledore from my office."

Afterwards, she conjured stretchers for the wounded and, clearing a large space in the middle of the Hall, asked the students to put them there. That took some time, and Madam Pomfrey and Arabella Figg arrived in the room while they were doing so. They gasped, and went

from student to student, Madam Pomfrey uttering a few spells, and Arabella making a large use of the magical tape. Noticing Hannah Abbot hovering around, trying to help, she sent her to the infirmary to fetch some potions and more tape.

During this, the Headmistress decided to take a first year from each house to tell her what had happened. Albus Dumbledore arrived at that moment, accompanied by Alastor Moody, who had been surprisingly quick with his wooden leg. The old Professor's normally calm stance immediately became angry. Here had been the weakest children, and the darkness had dared striking in their midst! He glanced sadly at the linen-covered bodies surrounded by weeping students, and vowed to himself to do his best about the perpetrators.

He discreetly asked Moody to check that nobody left the Hall, and went to McGonagall who was trying to discern what had happened through the young students' recollection of it. Their speech was confusing, though. They had all heard shouts coming from a privacy stall in the Slytherin area, before a few students erupted from it, armed with knives and wands, and they had attacked everybody. They easily showed to the old pair which students had attacked. The professors tied them with magical ropes and lined them on the dais where was the staff table. Looking at them, they confirmed that they all were Slytherins, but a detail got their attention some more.

Crabbe and Goyle.

Everybody knew about the infamous trio that terrorized the younger students in the corridors. Albus had let them continue, wanting to give them a chance to see the error in their way. He had justified his lack of action to the Headmistress with the additional reason that it did put the other students in contact with difficult situation which would no doubt arise in the real world. She had been reluctant but had accepted to let them free. Seeing the two young gorillas lying there, they felt that someone was missing. Someone who had been all smiles to everyone, but on who the darkest suspicions had been laid. Leading the two brutes. Tampering with Remus' potion. Daughter of Death Eaters, and Death Eater herself.

Pansy Parkinson.

They twirled around, intending to search the girl, when a commotion caught their attention at the doors. They didn't have to search for her, as she was there, kicking like an injured cat at the magical cage she was into. His wand raised, Moody appeared in the doorway, and directed the flying prison towards the two professors.

"I knew someone would try to flee."

"Thank you Alastor." said Dumbledore.

"My pleasure."

At that, Moody released the spell, and the prison evaporated. The girl hit the floor on her behind with a thump, and began to wail immediately, at the same time trying to smear the blood from her light cut to appear more like a victim. The two professors looked at each other for a brief moment, and nodded, before turning back towards her, wands raised. The next second, she was unconscious and tied like the other ones.

Dumbledore turned towards McGonagall. "We will need Veritaserum."

"Albus... the Ministry?"

"Even if Fudge was in place, I'd still say it's my school. Now that it's Arthur, it will be easier even."

She smiled. "Your school?"

He looked at her sheepishly. "Sorry. The force of habit, you know."

"I know, I know. Go, now, and fetch Severus."

Albus Dumbledore left the room, and left his smile there too. He didn't really need the Veritaserum to imagine what had taken place there, but his strong sense of 'what was right and what wasn't' pushed him to ask confirmation. He didn't need Snape, though, as he always had a vial of the truth serum at his disposal. Sure, he was going to wake

the man anyway, if only to share the good news about the Dementors. But he was fed up of giving people second chances, especially when it did cost many young and innocent lives.

May Merlin protect the guilty, now, because he sure wouldn't.

To be continued in next chapter: Honours...

Okay now, please bear with me.  
You will soon the ending see  
From the reviews I gather  
That I should go on hither.

## Chapter 25 – Honours

In the Headmistress' office, after the Death Eaters fled, Hermione still had the helmet on, and she had had quite a shock when the two dark wizards had been Kissed, as she had literally seen them entering the Cohort's mind. They weren't in control of it like her, though, only prisoners of it. She sensed that the mind had a different treatment for people entering it voluntarily, but she preferred to explore the mind some more, in search of other souls. She then discovered some souls that had been sucked away from their owners, each soul kept by the one Dementor that had sucked it. However, to her surprise, they were fewer than they should have been, given the creatures' millennium of activity. She explored their history a bit, especially the memories related to souls sucked, and gasped when she saw a dark corridor.

In the memory, she was in a dark corridor, but she didn't need light. On both sides of the corridor, she saw numerous alcoves. The mind told her that the Dementors went into the alcoves to get their load of souls sucked away from them through a strange device.

She didn't see anything else, though, as the helmet was forcibly removed from her head.

She yelled, grasping at it, until she remembered where she was. Albus Dumbledore looked at her anxiously, and she straightened herself. The few other people in the office looked at her with respect for some, and in wonder for the others.

“Sir?”

“Thank you, Hermione, but... what did I told you?”

“I'm sorry, Professor, but they have so much information to give, about the sucked souls, and their organization, and...”

The old man sighed, interrupting her rambling. “I know, Hermione. I suspected so. But a whole hour has passed already, and I didn't want you to miss dinner.”

“An hour? Dinner? Sir...”

“I know you are interested in the helmet, but I don’t want you to lose yourself in it. You will be able to interact more with it in the near future, but only under my supervision. After all, we have now a group of jobless Dementors standing on our grounds. And the dinner is being served to sustain the many defenders who worked successfully today.”

“I understand, sir. And don’t worry, I removed the order preventing you from accessing the mind.”

He looked at her suspiciously, and she felt she had to complete her sentence, so she described everything that she had done with it. At the mention of the corridor, Moody gasped, and told them about the corridor they went through in Azkaban and the pensieve-like item they got from the study room. At this, everyone was flabbergasted at its meaning. If said item contained the souls of every person whose soul had been sucked by Dementors, and if it allowed communication with them, it would be the most useful tool for learning history ever. However, it also meant that these souls must have been in the item for a long time, thus being prevented from having the afterlife they deserve.

Hermione finished her story, before extracting a promise from Dumbledore to keep her informed of further developments concerning the Dementors. After all, she had been a key in pushing the attack away from the castle, and, thanks to her, they now had a potential army at their disposal. Everybody thanked her before leaving the place, until only she and Dumbledore remained in the office.

He looked at her intently, before speaking again.

“You did great, Hermione.”

“Thank you, sir. I did what I could.”

“You did more than that. Notwithstanding the helmet happenstance, without your ideas, we would have been crushed under the Dementors.”

“The golden griffin helped too, sir.”

“Yes, yes. But don’t undervalue the impact of your research. That’s why you are going to be thanked, both officially and non-officially.”

“Thanked, sir?”

He looked at her with his usual twinkle in his eyes. “Non-officially, I would like to offer you the membership to a group of people dedicated in fighting the dark lords. The group, which I preside over, is called the Order of the Phoenix, and most of them had been there to defend the castle. Some even died.” He fell silent for an instant, before talking again, in a lighter tone. “I also believe that the order of Merlin third class is awarded for... how is it worded again? people who displayed a cold head in circumstances leading to the safeguarding of a great number of wizards and witches, an important magical location, or both.”

“But...”

“There is no ‘but,’ Hermione. Such an award at your age is truly rare, as only-”

“Let me guess... only three cases of such an award have been given to underage wizards over the school’s existence. I know, sir, I read Hogwarts, a History.”

“Truly impressive. Quite a book, too. But what it doesn’t state, is the age of those wizards. Only one of them was as young as you are, Hermione. The two others were older teenagers in their seventh year, a mere month from their coming-of-age.”

“Still, I don’t want the additional attention, sir.”

“Perhaps, if I present the situation from another angle, you will agree?”

“You may try, but I’m not sure about the agreeing part.”

“If I told you that such an award would open you all the wizarding libraries for free?”

Hermione was speechless. She had to remember to breathe at some point. It was like a dream come true. She spoke softly, afraid of shattering the idea.

“All libraries, sir?”

“All public libraries, yes. Even their Restricted Sections.”

She reflected about it, and only one cloud was marring her horizon. Yet, it was a large one.

“Sir? What about... Voldemort? If this is done, he will know what I did, and I will be sought after. And my parents will be, too?”

“Hmmm... yes. This is the drawback. We will find something to solve the problem, but are you agreeing on the award part?”

“Well... after you highlighted the bookworm aspect of my person, I couldn’t very well refuse.”

They chuckled, before he spoke again. “I guess it’s a yes, then. Do you allow me to announce it at the feast this evening?”

“I’m not sure about it. I think we have to work the protection first. I’m sure there are some junior Death Eaters in the students somewhere...”

At that, he frowned, and she sensed that it was a tough subject. His answer, then, surprised her. “These have been taken care of.”

“Really? How?”

“Really. And I think we should proceed, as the others will be hungry, waiting for my speech. I’ll tell you ‘How’ after dinner, if you agree to meet me in my office then.”

“Okay, then. I agree about you telling the school, then. I’m already seen as a bizarre student already anyway.”

“I’m sure that your Gryffindor housemates will be most interested in the tale of your bravery in research.”

They both grinned, before standing to head for the waiting meal.  
A bit later, in an empty office...

Gabriel and Tamara appeared in the deserted office. At least, this time, it hadn’t changed. Nobody was sleeping either, and no cage appeared. Gabriel changed immediately into a winged lion, while Tamara watched him, fascinated. Looking at her, he nodded towards a torch on the wall. Taking it, she wondered briefly what kind of living place could be made of stone with wooden torches as only mean of lighting. Using her fire mastery, she lit it.

Following the leonine form of Gabriel out of the room, she gasped when she saw the huge interior of the castle. Looking around, she thought that she caught a movement in the corner of her eye, but it was only a portrait, and she turned away, sighing. She still had the impression of being watched by hundreds of tiny eyes, though, and it was unnerving. Gabriel was crazy to actually want to come back here. Gabriel was...

Gabriel was gone!

She looked around in fright, before hearing his voice coming from downstairs.

“Come down here, Tam. There is nobody already.”

She looked over the stone railing, and, looking around quickly found the quickest route to the entrance hall. Gabriel was mumbling alone, pacing back and forth. He stopped and faced her.

“The first time I arrived in this place, the office was dusty and locked. The second time, there was someone, and I barely escaped. The third time, there’s a battle raging right where we stand. And now... nothing. Not even a dent in the wall of this damn school. Am I becoming crazy, Tam?”

“Gabe... if I know one thing, it’s that you are not crazy. You have much to understand, and you have to recover your own mind, but you definitely aren’t crazy.”

A pause, while he resumed his pacing.

“Gabe? You’ve been here only four times?”

“Hmmm? Yes...”

“Were you in this place before? I mean... before last summer?”

“Possibly... I don’t know.”

“How do you know it’s a school?”

He faced her. “I didn’t know it was a school.”

“You just said it. You said ‘not a dent in this damn school wall’ or something like that.”

“I did?” He frowned.

“Yes.”

“Then it means that I went to school here doesn’t it?”

“Could be.”

“Then I should know where to sleep, and where to eat?”

“You slept at school?”

“Supposing that it’s a boarding school, yes.”

“Is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know, this conversation is pretty scary, and the setting doesn’t help.”

“Give us more light.”

She closed her eyes, and the flame suddenly got whiter.

“Happy?”

“Yes.”

“Now...” He reflected intensely. “It’s dark outside so it’s evening or night time, but before curfew.”

“You had a curfew?”

“Shhh, I’m trying to remember.”

“Oh sorry. Go on.”

“I’d go... up this stair...” They ascended the stair. “Then this one.” They climbed that one too. “Then we pass this doorway, beware of the armour.”

“Which armour?”

They passed the doorway and he stopped her, showing an armour seeming to guard an empty passageway. "This one."

"How did you know..." At his frown, she spoke quickly. "Oh! Forget I asked."

"Right. Now, where is that tower?"

"Tow...? Right, I'm mute."

"Down these steps, and up that one stair. Here we are!"

"Here? There's nothing here except the stair we just climbed, a corridor, and plenty of portraits."

"I know, it's strange, huh?"

"Thank you, Captain Obvious."

"Nice, nice."

"What do we do now?"

"Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"Where do I go when I'm hungry?"

"The Eating Hall?"

"Thank you, but the question was mostly for myself."

"Oh alright."

"Still, the Hall it must be. A Hall where we all gather. We are four, and we are four hundred." He ignored her inquiring gaze, and

continued to think aloud. "So the Hall must be big to accommodate us all. It's the Big Hall? Not quite. The Large Hall. The Tall Hall? The..."

"Grand? Great?" She was beginning to feel annoyed.

"Yes!"

"Yes what?"

"It's the Great Hall! I remember, now."

"Great! Sorry, no pun intended. Where is it?"

"Follow me."

Gabriel started to walk in a direction, ascending stairs and descending others. On the whole path, she felt observed by the still-present hundreds of eyes, as if the castle was kind of... alive. They finally stopped in front of a large set of doors behind which they could hear indistinct noise.

Gabriel felt at home, he knew this place, he was sure of it, now. The darkness engulfing his memory was starting to recede with each step he had taken in the castle. It wasn't complete, however, as he only uncovered little details when he stumbled upon them. He desperately wanted more, and felt that the answer was beyond these doors. Ignoring the worried glance Tamara shot him, he pushed on the seemingly heavy doors, hard.

A bit earlier, now...

The Great Hall had been cleaned, the wounded brought in the hospital wing, and the dead students had been laid in a classroom nearby, alit with candles. After the tables had been put up again, the room had filled little by little, as people had trickled in from the infirmary. The wildest rumours had started on the reasons behind the castle still being up despite the Dementor attack, and the sound only quieted when Albus Dumbledore entered the Hall, followed by Hermione Granger.

Once Dumbledore inside, the doors closed automatically, and he went to the front of the Hall, thinking about everything that had happened today. Turning around on the dais, even before joining his seat, he addressed the students.

“Dear students, dear staff, this day is sad for many of us, but we all fought valiantly, and succeeded in pushing the assailant out.”

Cheers erupted in the hall, albeit subdued by the many losses, and Dumbledore let them release their pent-up anxiety, before continuing.

“Unfortunately, in this very hall, the treachery of the dark side did cost us many lives. I’ll take the blame for that, but know that the perpetrators had been duly punished, and the Death Eaters responsible for this had been punished even more severely.”

This raised a few conversations, as everybody had noticed now the empty space in the Slytherin table.

“We also lost friends and colleagues in the Entrance Hall battle, and we will mourn them properly when everything will be set up accordingly.” From the corner of his eyes, Dumbledore noticed a movement at Gryffindor table. Turning his head, he noticed that Ron and Ginny Weasley had stood up. Thinking that it was in homage to Bill Weasley, he continued his speak. “Now, perhaps, you wonder how we could turn those Dementors away? This has been the job of many, but sustained by the work of one person that I want to thank now, before being able to do it more formally later. One student who had devoted every minute of her spare time on studying the dark creatures. One person who had the bravery needed to sustain the creature’s effect for a long time without flinching. One... Hermione Granger.”

After the shocked silence, during which only Dumbledore and Snape clapped, the Gryffindors applauded their housemate, finally understanding why their resident bookworm hadn’t spoken to any of them during the year. They were quickly followed by the other houses

as, without knowing the exact details, the students knew that she was responsible for their victory today.

After the applause died down, Dumbledore continued his speech. He was still aware that the two youngest Weasleys were standing, and didn't know why. Perhaps they wanted to speak about Bill? He would have to ask them after he finished.

"There are many questions to which we don't have an answer yet, but I promise we will try to find an answer soon. For instance, why did some of our people work for the enemy, while some of the enemies worked for us, some even sacrificing themselves for our well-being?" He nodded towards Ron and Ginny, but, to his surprise, they weren't even registering what he was saying and were looking at the doors. He also noticed that, at the Ravenclaw table, Luna Lovegood had also stood up and was looking at the doors too, her back to him.

Wondering about this, he continued to speak. "The last mystery is about the golden griffin that has appeared to help us, even helping to revive some fallen defenders we thought lost. Rest assured that we are searching about it right n-"

The doors of the great hall seemed heavy. They were heavy. But they were mounted on magically treated hinges, and opened on the slightest touch. When Gabriel pushed them hard, they opened violently, banging on the walls and surprising everybody, the perpetrator included.

He shuddered under the many gazes, and advanced a few steps into the now silent hall, cautiously followed by Tamara. To every witness, they were like muggles discovering the Great Hall by accident. Three of them, though, thought differently. One of the three wanted to rush to the boy's side, but her human legs weren't fast enough, nor were they powerful enough to jump over the tables. To almost everyone's surprise, Ginny Weasley transformed into a lioness, before roaring and jumping above Gryffindor then Hufflepuff tables in two leaps.

The students who had been saved by the unknown lion in the forest recognized her. Snape recognized her. Gabriel recognized her. In half a second, he was on all fours, and took his leonine appearance.

Ginny stopped in front of him and inclined her head on the side, smirking in a lion's way. Gabriel shrugged, before growing his wings again. Everyone gasped.

Once again, they went closer and closer, their hearts beating the same rhythm in the silent hall, until Ron, who hadn't moved yet, started to run towards Dumbledore, yelling.

"No! They're doing it again! Stop them!"

The twins, as well as Hermione, had witnessed the effects first-hand in the alley, and they stood up, trying to cast a shield around the lions, while Hermione shouted "Circle of protection! Cast a circle of protection"

The teachers didn't grasp what the teenagers were saying. Only Snape got the message and started the incantation. But the felines were closing in already.

Hearing all these shouts, Tamara understood what they wanted, and, throwing her torch near the two beasts, concentrated, raising a hand. A circle of flames extended from the torch and surrounded the lions just as they licked each other's face.

The sound was as if lightning had struck the very spot. The circle of flames held half of the damage, but the nearest tables got pushed a few inches away by a gust of powerful wind. The two lions fell on the floor, and the winged one disappeared. Again. In the commotion that ensued, Luna approached Tamara discreetly, and put something in her hand, before speaking to her ear.

"Flee!"

After the noise went down, the wizards began to look at Tamara strangely. The black girl had witnessed the whole scene. She had entered with the boy who had transformed into the winged lion, when the wizards thought of them as mere muggles judging by their earlier gasping. She had blocked a shockwave with a circle of fire, invoked

without a wand. To everyone here, she was an oddity. To the most aged and knowledgeable here, she was...

She shuddered, as she saw the intention in some of the older wizards, the bearded one being the most focussed.

She was a prize.

She prepared to turn around and run, when she reflected that she couldn't very well escape in that way, not knowing the building nor the location. They would be faster and their spells were flying. She had only one option. She had hoped never to use it, but now was the emergency case her father had talked her about.

She stood in the middle of the hall, head hung and eyes closed, and she raised her hands. For everyone present, she had abandoned the fight and was surrendering. When they noticed the trembling air around her, though, it was too late already.

The girl was swiftly surrounded by a wave of fire so hot that the nearby chairs and clothes, even a few feet from the flame, went ablaze, to the student's dismay. The circle of flames around the girl continued for a second, then flashed white, before disappearing. At the girl's place, a charred circle remained.

They all looked flabbergasted. They had just received answers to some of their questions, but that raised other ones. The most urgent thing to do, now that the strange girl had escaped, was to help the unconscious lion. Dumbledore conjured a magically lifted stretcher large enough for it, while Snape approached Hermione and spoke to her ear.

"It has been done before, hasn't it?"

At her thoughtful silence, he pressed on.

"That was what had happened in the alley, wasn't it?"

She looked at him in annoyance, and answered, a little too loudly to be private. "Yes! Now, let me think."

He knew her, now, and realized that she was gathering her numerous thoughts, on the verge of finding something. In that state, you could be Voldemort himself, and she'd have answered in the same way.

A second later, she nodded, satisfied with herself. To the still waiting Severus, she muttered "Dumbledore's, after dinner." She then followed the lion-laden stretcher outside, with Ron, Luna, and the twins. Nonplussed, Dumbledore finished his scheduled, although retarded, speech, informing the students that classes were obviously cancelled for a few days. Nobody felt the need to rejoice, though, because the circumstances were extraordinarily sad. The aged Professor then sat down and the plates filled with the evening meal. Elsewhere...

In a small glade, under a blue sky, two doors were set, opposing one another, separated by ten yards of grass in the middle of which a marble chess board was levitating. The black clad androgyne was there already, looking at the game with a smirk plastered on his face. The old man rushed through the door, fuming. The room immediately lost its pastoral scenery and fell back to its initial stony appearance.

"Annoyed, are we?"

The man took a moment to collect himself, glancing at the board. When he spoke, his underlying anger, as strong as Nature itself, was barely contained.

"How could I not be? Thou gave him the promotion spell... I can only congratulate you."

"I have as much the right to use my trump cards as you. With your schemes inside schemes, I doubt your pawns even know their job."

"Of course they do not! We agreed not to let them know."

“Did we? It seems to me that that clause had been uttered but not brought on the contract.”

“Thou didn’t...”

“Yes, I did! It’s your fault you sign treaties too willingly! Besides, I want to win!”

“Was not the last of thine victories sufficient? Forty millions...”

“Now that I acquired the taste, I can only ask for more.”

They went silent, watching the chess figures moving around. After a long pause, the old man spoke again, and gone was the anger.

“Thou know, now that I reflect on the subject of this, getting him out and letting me know about thine modest treachery might have brought worse ideas in mine fatigued mind. We will meet later.”

He was openly smiling, now, and the other could only look at him in apprehension, as the scenery changed to a desolated landscape, but beautiful in an eerie way. As the old man left the room, the other spent a long time asking himself why he was now seeing the earth from the moon’s surface.

Dumbledore’s office...

When Hermione entered the room, she saw that her Potion mentor was already there, and that a bird disappeared in a flash of flames. Knowing about phoenixes and their abilities, she looked at the old man inquiringly, while sitting in one of the available armchairs.

“It’s a bit late for correspondence, isn’t it Professor?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “True, true. But, after ordering the Dementors into one of the castle’s remotest wing, I had to inform the Ministry of the true extent of today’s event. I just sent a letter to Arthur Weasley, another to Amelia Bones, and another to... Rita Skeeter.”

Snape reacted at that. “You’re mad, Albus! That woman will-”

“I made it clear that she was to write what I told her.”

That brought a silent pause, before Dumbledore turned toward Hermione.

“I also filled a form that I also included with the Minister’s letter, for you to receive the award.” He turned toward Snape, and recounted what the girl had done during the battle.

During this, Snape was looking at her wide-eyed, and Dumbledore concluded by “...and, as you already have this award yourself, Severus, you understand I can’t ask for you to get it again.”

“I understand. I guess congratulations are in order.” He rose, ready to shake hand formally with her.

“Order, order... was it a joke, Severus?” Dumbledore’s eyes were, as always, twinkling madly.

The Potion Master stopped in mid-stride and turned toward the old man, scowling. From her seat, though, Hermione could notice that the man’s ears were reddening. He was blushing!

Wanting to end the uncomfortable situation, she rose as well, and took his hand to shake it. “Thank you, Professor.”

“So,” started Albus again, looking at her with an amused smile, “are you ready to get your medal next week?”

She blushed, before sitting down again. She looked at the old man. “I’m not realizing. All this is so sudden.”

“I understand. If you wish, we can push the ceremony later, like midsummer?”

“No! I mean... I want to be able to get that Library access as soon as summer starts.”

Snape looked at the two of them, before fixing his gaze on the old man. "I can't believe you pushed her using that card, Albus."

"Why? It's true, and it worked, yes?"

Hermione looked at them inquiringly, a frown on her face. Dumbledore sensed that he had to explain, or a very clever witch would be coming for his hide.

"Severus suggested that you get that award as soon as we learnt that Voldemort was working on the Dementor as well, based on the fact that your research gave us a head start. But we all know that you'd have refused. I had a quick exchange with Arthur afterwards, and he confirmed that the little advantage I told you about exists. Then the battle broke up, and I didn't have time to speak to you about it until you practically... saved us."

She blushed. She had wanted to express her anger at being manipulated into accepting the award, but finally came to grips with it, because she had really deserved it. Recovering, she addressed the old man. "Am I to receive a protection afterwards, as I asked you before?"

"You don't let anything pass by, do you?"

"Sorry about that, sir, but I have been well trained. Well?"

"We can put your home under Fidelius, but your parents could be target at their job. They wouldn't want to live in a relative prison either, I guess, so I have several ideas about that. The main and foremost is about your identity. I thought about it during the meal, and I think that merely changing your identity would be sufficient, as the usual magical detection spells wouldn't find you, or your parents, then."

"Seems interesting. You have other ideas as well?"

"Truthfully, that one was the most practical. I'd rather have you next to us in the incoming battles, rather than in a remote country."

“Oh! Well... I agree.” She thought about for a while, before addressing him again. “I guess we are going to have our memory modified, am I right?”

He nodded.

“I don’t really like that, but I don’t have much choice either. Are there names on the... what it is? A medal?”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise at her being so thorough. “It’s a badge, and there’s no name on it, as one can only have and use one when awarded it. The ceremony will take care of that. However, there is a register with all the recipients’ names in the Ministry.”

She looked at him, having taken her decision. “We’ll do that, then. But after the ceremony. I don’t want my new name for all spies to see.”

Now that it was settled, Dumbledore conjured some tea, and they sipped it in silence for a while.

Snape, suddenly remembering what had happened earlier, looked at Hermione questioningly. “What were you thinking about, in the Great Hall?”

“What? Oh! That... I’m sorry, I was thinking about all the new things I knew about Harry.”

“You mean... you didn’t know him already before he died?”

She looked at the other Professor, and he shook his head. Apparently, Severus Snape hadn’t been made privy to all of the developments about Ginny’s case.

“He might be alive.”

“What?”

“You heard me. And we might have seen him, in the Great Hall, and in the battle against the Dementors as well. And in the alley where I called you, too. Remember the magical signatures you found?”

He nodded, too flabbergasted to interrupt.

She continued. “We have discovered since then that it could have been left there by an item made by James Potter. For whom would he have made magical items if it’s not for his family? He was an Auror, not an artefact builder. Besides, the lion always came for Ginny, each time.”

Albus Dumbledore was looking at the excited teen, and decided to share some information as well. “There is more, Severus, Hermione.”

At their startled expressions, he raised his hand to prevent interruption, before continuing. “Minerva and I have discovered, a few months ago, that a visitor had entered the castle unannounced, through magical means, namely a portkey. We discovered that it was a boy, and, after a discussion I got with Nymphadora Tonks... you don’t know her, but she was here with the Azkaban mission group. She’s an Auror, and a metamorphmagus. Anyways, I discovered that the boy was one, even better than her, and...”

He was interrupted then by Hermione, who had looked thoughtful at one point. “It’s Harry, then! He told us... Well, he asked us to keep it quiet, and didn’t give us much insight into it, but he told us about it, last year, before... before going to that wretched place.”

Dumbledore looked contrite at that. “I’m sorry, Hermione. I would never have...”

“Don’t apologize to me, Professor. Besides, it’s too late now.”

Snape looked at her, and asked “What did he tell you about?”

She looked at them both, before looking at her hands, her mind going back in the past. “He was starting to experiment with the animagus

and metamorphmagus transformations. He read a book which unified these transformations into a wider theory.”

“Which book?” asked Dumbledore. “I don’t know anything about such a theory, or such a book, and I taught the subject for... for a while.”

“That’s the question. He told us it was written by an ancestor of him.”

“Who?”

“He didn’t tell.”

“Speaking of ancestors,” continued Albus, “that boy, who I’m not comfortable calling Harry right now, appeared twice in an old teacher’s office. He may have appeared there also during the battle, but we were too occupied to notice. The first time around, Minerva and I went to that office and its door resisted my best unlocking spells for a while. In the dusty office, we found something... disturbing. Do you remember Professor Shaun, Severus? In your first year as a student here?”

The Potion Master seemed to think about it for a moment, before answering. “Not quite, Albus. I recall she taught something related to muggles, and at that time...” He looked at Hermione quite shamefully.

“I understand. She was teaching Technomancy, the art of mixing magic and muggle devices. Quite what you did with the Dementor, by the way.”

Hermione interrupted him. “Why don’t we have that course now, Professor?”

“I’ll answer that tricky question later, Hermione. For now, let me tell you that we found a stack of assignments, and one of them was from James Potter.” Dumbledore ignored the scowl from Snape. The Potion Master had hated James Potter for all his life, and the scowl was a reflex now.

“So... what?”

“At the end of his assignment, he wrote something that forced us to discover that Professor Shaun was his mother. Harry’s grandmother, thusly. And I am beginning to believe that we are to see young Harry more and more often around.”

Snape interrupted him. “Even if it’s him, he has changed beyond what we knew of him! In the Great Hall, I didn’t think it was him and I’m sure no one else did. Dressed as a muggle, gawking around, much taller, without glasses and with all his scars...”

“It has been a year, Severus. I gather it has been a difficult one for him, from the start.”

“Professor Dumbledore?”

“Yes, Hermione?”

“What about the other one? She wasn’t quite a muggle, right?”

The old Professor sighed. “You are right, Hermione. When she stopped that shockwave, some of us noticed that she did it without a wand. It’s quite rare for a wizard to achieve a great control over magic without a focus, hence the wand. It’s unheard of that a young teenage girl could bring up a perfect circle of flames without a wand and in a split second. She did, though, and it pointed to the myth of the elementals. Do you know about it?”

“Are these those ones supposedly controlling the elements?”

“You named it. No wizard had been able to confirm it, so I wanted to question her about it, but she left, through a strange fire construct.”

They finished their tea, reflecting about the evasive teenagers.

Standing up, Hermione addressed Dumbledore a last time. “Professor, if we meet Harry... what can we do?”

The old man reflected about it, before answering. "Comfort him. Make him feel at home. Merlin knows he's elusive enough as it is. And then, try to discover his story."

"I was already thinking about that last part, sir."

"No doubt, no doubt. Now, it's getting late, and I guess we are all tired by this troublesome day. Good night."

"Good night, professors."

"Good night Hermione."

Auror Headquarters, the same evening...

The angry Auror, who happened to be the only metamorphmagus of their ranks, entered the old man's office. Even retired, Alastor Moody had been given a room to himself in the Auror Headquarter building. The old man looked at her with his magical eye, while his whole body was looking through an overly large register, his back to her. Noticing her state, though, he put a ruler in the book and turned around.

"What is it, Tonks?"

Her only answer was to slap her hand on his desk. When she removed it, he noticed the item she left there. Straw. Not understanding the meaning of it, he looked at her and repeated his question.

"What is it, Tonks?"

She huffed. She was so angry that she couldn't speak for a short time. He sensed that her fury wasn't against him, however, so he just waited for her to express herself.

"It's... it's the result... of a perfectly cast... Finite Incantatem... on my wand!"

He looked at her, then at the straw, not understanding everything. She huffed again, before dropping in a seat and taking her head in her hands. In clipped sentences, she explained that she had launched into the battlefield earlier that evening, but her wand wasn't working. She had to use her second wand, even if she wasn't as proficient with it. Thankfully, the Dementors had left soon afterwards. After coming back to the Headquarters, she had cast the dispelling spell on her wand, and it had transformed in a small pile of straw. She then looked at him.

“Mad-Eye, you know when I saw straw for the last time?”

He looked at her, his working eye wide in understanding. “In Azkaban.”

“Yes. I didn't know why I felt so sleepy, then. I'm sure the old man stole it and replaced it with transfigured straw.”

He gawked at her for a second. “You mean that a prisoner now has a wand?”

She hung her blushing head in shame, but nodded. “I want to return there, and check if he's still in his cell.”

“Since he had had a wand for a few hours, I don't think he is there anymore, but go ahead.”

He wrote a few chosen words on a scroll and gave it to her.

After she left, he returned to the book and used his magical eye to read it quickly. Four hours afterwards, he turned the last page, and slammed the book shut angrily before leaving the room. Obviously, he hadn't found what he was searching.

The cloud of dust that had risen from the book settled, and its cover became visible again. If anyone was there, they could have read “Azkaban Prisoners, Self-Updating Register.”

In the basement of a house in northern London...

The man was working on one project for his job. He was, like always, in his heated basement, a large fire blazing in the chimney. But, even in the warm atmosphere, he couldn't miss the rise in temperature. Turning around in surprise, he noticed that a flame had appeared in the middle of the room, thankfully devoid of anything flammable. It was as if the room had been made on purpose.

Of course it had been made on purpose!

The man looked at the expanding flame inquiringly. None of his usual visitors were scheduled for a visit, and his other friends didn't know of this place. There was only one person other than him and them who knew about it, and that was because he had taught her so.

And he had done well, visibly, as his daughter emerged from the now recessing flame, exhausted. He had just the time to catch her before she could hit the floor. She wasn't wounded, but the trip had clearly cost her more energy than usual. He was worried about the circumstances, but didn't press her, as she was in the safety of the hidden room.

He released her on the couch, and got himself a strong alcohol before sitting across from her in his favourite armchair. In the blink of an eye, the fire in the chimney rose in volume, and the temperature mounted with it. Tamara was resting, recovering, and his father was helping her.

After a while, he noticed a bit of paper that had escaped Tamara's hand. Not exactly paper, he reflected, rather parchment...

It suddenly reminded him of unhappy memories, and raised suspicions about her whereabouts. Unfolding the paper warily, as if the small thing could eat him, he read what was written on it, and let it fall in shock. Taking it again in trembling hands, he read it again.

Next time, make sure he empties his energy beforehand. Train him for that, and then bring him to Air elder Joshua Ch'larwen.

The message was short, and out of context. He knew the named individual however, and it made him shudder in anger, reflecting about the past and the political rift between elemental families. His anger made the room atmosphere waver, and Tamara stirred in her sleep, remembering him the circumstances, and forcing him to cool down.

As it was, he still couldn't allow his daughter to meet that man. The rest of the message was strange also, but seemed innocuous enough to be left alone. She would remember having a message, anyway, so he couldn't totally destroy it. He took it away, and copied it, the reference to the Air elder removed. He then threw the original in the air, and it burned to its last constituents, not even leaving ashes.

Mark O'Malley wasn't an elder yet, but as a Fire Master, he had powers on par with his responsibilities, and vice-versa.

To be continued in next chapter: Memories...

So, when will they meet for good?  
I already feel your mood,  
A little bit more, I say.  
At least review once today.

## Chapter 26 – Memories

Gabriel woke in his hideaway. Again. In his lion form. Again. He didn't understand how, each time he felt that wonderful feeling in himself, he had to be subtracted from his love. At least, now, he knew where to start to search for her.

He was torn, though, between his need of her, and the world he had lived in for a whole year. Joan still needed him, he thought, and Tamara...

Tamara!

She had been with him in that place and she wasn't there with him!

Happy to have an excuse, he quickly jumped on his feet, and spoke the activation for the third time.

“Hogliewarts.”

He hadn't calculated the time difference this time, though, and arrived in a pitch black room. Cursing his lack of clairvoyance, he prepared to go back to Joan and Michael's place to fetch a flashlight, when someone spoke next to him.

“Lumos.”

He jumped three feet in fright at the sound, and at the light. Someone was there! He looked around in fear, before the person took his hand and tried to soothe him. It was difficult, though, as half of what the girl said didn't make sense and the other half was tugging at forgotten memories. Something in her monologue attracted his attention, though.

“...and everyone else had spent their evening around Ginny. She had been awake enough to turn back, before-”

“What did you say?”

The girl sighed, before putting her lighted wand in her hair.

“I said ‘Ginny.’ You don’t remember her? If you make the room explode each time you two meet, it’s quite normal, though.”

“I made what?” He looked at her as if she had lost her head.

“Harry, you are a-”

“Wait wait wait! How did you call me?”

“I called you Harry.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s your name, silly!”

“My name is...” he sounded hesitant, suddenly.

“Okay, you don’t remember. I’ll help you.”

“You will?” He sounded hopeful and afraid at the same time. He sensed that the barriers of his mind had started to crack under the pressure already, and a little help would release the memories he was so afraid of and longed for at the same time.

“Yes. But I have something else to do beforehand, as I don’t really want to be grilled like a hamburger. Nor having you faint.”

“What are you going to do?”

“It’s not me, it’s you. What do you know about the Elements?”

“Tam showed me... Tam! Where is she?” He looked around in panic, ready to run through the door.

“You mean... the black girl who was with you before?”

“Yes!”

“She left, through the surest mean possible to escape curious wizards: elemental travel.”

He was flabbergasted again, and she giggled. Shaking himself, he continued to ask questions. “Why escape curious wizards, and what is elemental travel. And, while I’m asking, who are you?”

“I’m Luna, nice to meet you. You are?”

“I’m... I don’t even know! Call me Gabriel; I have had that name for a year, now.”

She lowered her head, and her answer was barely audible. “Like the archangel, how appropriate.”

“What?”

“Nothing, just elaborating...”

“What about curious wizards and the other thing?”

“Elemental travel is not your league yet, but will be, after you train sufficiently. Let’s just say that she went home. The other question will need more details. You know the Elements?”

“Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. And others in between.” He smiled, remembering his lesson with Tam, about the Spheres.

“Good boy. I think everybody had noticed you being a Lightning one. I’m an Air one.”

“Cool! You could teach me with Tam, then.”

“Yes, but we don’t have much time, and Hogwarts is definitely not the place.”

“Hog... warts?”

“Yes. The school we are in right now!”

“Ah. Yes. I remember, now.” and it was true, if his mounting headache could be taken as a proof of that.

She continued, though, and spoke animatedly. “Wizards think Elementals are a legend because Elementals hide from the world. Elemental think that Wizards are a legend because Wizards hide from the world. Each of these two groups of people has its own rules of secrecy, and you’ll almost never notice stray magic in the streets, or elemental prowess in public. You and I are right in the middle of this mess, because we are...”

“Both?”

“Right. We are called between ourselves as Magius. You’re a Magius, Harry.”

“Still that name!”

“Yes. It’s almost time to drop the masks. Just a little... grounding... beforehand.”

“What?”

“Just a joke. I think the term was very appropriate for your particular element.”

“Yes. Lightning. Grounding. Right. What do you want?”

She picked a long and shiny object from the floor and gave it to him. “Hold this sword. It’s the only thing entirely metallic I could find in my off-curfew run.”

“You knew I was going to show up?”

“I suspected so, so I also disarmed the trap and temporarily moved the detection spell that was on your arrival spot. Now take that sword already, we don’t have all night!”

“What do I do with it, now?”

“Hold it in front of you, and don’t touch anything with it for the whole exercise, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now, I want you to think of a mildly happy memory. A birthday cake?” He looked at her blankly, and she understood her mistake. “Sorry, bad idea. Helping friends?”

“Okay. I’m helping Kevin and the others in dressing as a wizard for Halloween.”

“How appropriate. Now close your eyes, and meditate. You feel that energy in your heart?”

“Hmmm... Yes. It looks like a spark.”

“In your case, yes, it should be.”

“What do I do with it? It’s disappearing!”

“Stay focused on your memory. I want you to imagine the spark escaping through your hands, into the sword.”

He concentrated for a while, until he felt the spark had transferred to the blade. “It... it works!”

“I can see that. The blade has faint sparks around it, now. Let’s do it again with something stronger, while keeping these sparks there. You had imagined helping your friends once. Now try to remember all your happy moments together. All of them. And push the energy through your hands.”

“Argh... it’s too much...”

“I guarantee that it’s not too much! It will be when you’ll collapse. You have to train, young Magius, or you’ll be hunted by both our communities...”

“Don’t tell me...”

“Stay focused! Good! See? Now let’s do it again. Without speaking of true love, have you felt a physical attraction for anyone?”

“Errrm...”

“I’m not asking anything, mind you. If you have, remember the feeling, and pass it through your hands.”

“Okay.” He concentrated, before some more sparks could be seen dancing around the blade. “I’m... doing... it... damn! It’s... painful.”

“Stay focused. Good. When you are done, open your eyes.”

He opened them, and looked at the sword in wonder, panting from the exhaustion. The weapon was positively glowing, now. “What is this?”

“It’s all your positive energy gathered in one place. You can see it’s really strong. It’s even lighting better than my wand now.”

“Wand? Do I have one?”

“You should... but let’s stay on topic. Let’s fill this sword to the brink.”

“What do I do?”

“You’ll do as before, pushing the energy, but now, you are going to think about Ginny.”

“Who?”

“The redhead lioness.”

He closed his eyes and reflected for a few seconds, then... “Oh. Oh! Oh my god! It’s... it’s too much! I’m going to burn my hands if I push it through!”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s your element, it can’t harm you.”

“Remind me... that... later. Damn! I’m... going... to fall... asleep... after this. It’s... draining... me.”

“That’s partly the idea.”

“What?”

“Stay focused! I just said that I want to make you recover your memories but I don’t want to receive a lightning bolt because of it, so you are being grounded to that sword.”

“Okay... I... understand... now.”

They spent a few minutes in silence, Gabriel concentrating on passing his energy on the sword, slowly, steadily.

“Sweet Merlin!” Luna suddenly exclaimed.

“What?” He still had his eyes closed, and she suspected that he hadn’t finished yet.

“Did you put all of it into the sword?”

“Only... half... of... it.”

“Move over there, quick!” She pushed him towards a corner of the room where no carpet was decorating the stone floor. Once there, he

suddenly noticed that the sword was strange. The combined action of all that energy had melted it so much that the blade literally leaked on the floor, in a white-hot and sizzling metal puddle.

“What? Oh! I broke it!” Gabriel was apologetic, but Luna merely shrugged it off. Taking the sword hilt, she set it on the metal heap before it could solidify completely.

“You really must have quite an impressive power to melt metal like this.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. And don’t worry about losing your energy like that. It’s just to prevent too much shock to myself and the surroundings. You’ll recover every spark of it after a good night of sleep.”

“Okay.”

“Now, are you ready?”

“What for?”

“To recover your memory, silly!”

“Oh. Okay. It’s just that there is so much to learn at the same time...”

“Remember. Don’t talk about Elementals to non-Elementals. Don’t talk about Wizards to non-Wizards. And never ever talk about Magius.”

“You just did.”

“I silenced the area before coming here. No one can hear us.”

“Okay, then. Proceed.”

“Just don’t ask question, and repeat after me.”

“ ... ”

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

“My name is Harry James Potter.” She closed her eyes, and concentrated.

“My name is Harry James Potter.” He did the same.

A slight pause.

“That’s all?”

Another pause. She was still concentrating.

“Wait... I can sense them coming in... I don’t want... No! My eye! Not the knife! AAAAAAARRRGGH!”

The boy who didn’t have a name crumbled in a heap, and kicked wildly, continuing to scream at the recollection of his past. Several shockwaves erupted in the room, but Luna, who had retreated in the farthest corner of the room, protected behind an Air shield, reflected that they would have been considerably stronger if he hadn’t emptied himself beforehand.

The last dam of his memory had just burst, and every little torture his relatives had inflicted on him, either physical or mental, was relived. His two years at Hogwarts, with the special events that had crowned them, passed in front of his mind’s eye. And Ginny. Ginny lying deathly pale in the accursed Chamber. Ginny smiling at him. Ginny hugging him close, saying ‘see you later.’

Gabriel Swift had collapsed, screaming. Harry James Potter rose from the floor an hour afterwards, smiling. Forty minutes of the hour had been spent screaming, though, and his throat was sore to the

point of forbidding speech. His eye, though, had recovered his usual green colour, and was now twinkling with happiness at feeling whole again.

“Thanks.” He croaked.

Luna gave him a glass of water from the nearby bathroom tap, glancing at him warily. He drank it and returned it with a smile.

“Thank you, Luna, that’s better now. You were really prepared, weren’t you?”

“Harry?”

“Yes?”

“It’s you, Harry?”

“Yes. It’s me. And my relatives are going to pay.” The new information Harry had gathered about all his childhood had rolled into a ball of bad thoughts, and he was furious at them.

“Sorry to disappoint you on this point, then.”

“Huh?”

“They died already.”

“How? I hope it was painful.”

“Their house burned, it seems. I only got the story through a string of reporters. Their dental marks identified the three of them. The fourth body, on the other hand...”

“Let me guess... no dental record, so they just guessed I was dead?”

“Right.”

“It’s no wonder I had no record... they never brought me there. Luna?”

“Yes?”

“I know I owe you, big time. Anything I can do for you, now or whenever you want, just ask.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

“However, I want to spend some more time unknown from the outside world. I have a whole new mind to sort, and...”

“If you want help on this one, ask me.”

“Why, you know how to sort my mind?”

“Well... sort of. I already helped you recover it.”

“How?”

“What do you know about Elemental powers?”

“Nothing, Tam only told me about the spheres.”

“I’ll just say that Air elementals have knowledge to influence the mind. One of their jobs is to hide the Elemental community from the Unorienteds.”

“I’d like it if you can help me with that. However, I have to give an explanation to my muggle friends, though. They deserve it, even if it will be censored.” He fell silent for a moment, before raising his head again. “Can you keep all this information for yourself? Or do some people already know?”

“I kept this trip to myself, but Ron will know. He’ll keep quiet, though.”

“What about Ron?”

“You have much to discover about what had happened since you... died. I will owl you a few letters to sum up the main changes from last year. Some of them are really... disturbing.”

“Can’t you tell them now?”

“I don’t know if you are fit to receive more information, especially of this calibre.”

“I’ll sort my mind later. Shoot.”

“Okay. You asked for it, but I’ll start gently.” They sat face-to-face on the floor, before she started again. “Ginny is an animagus.”

“Hmmm... I knew that already. I guess I’m one, too.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, you are not. An animagus can transform into an animal. Not a mythical creature.”

“And not several animals?”

“No, why?”

“Well...”

“Don’t tell me, or it’s my brain which will overload. I’d be glad to know how, though.”

“As promised, you’ll be the first to know. As soon as I sort my mind.”

“Now, Ron... is my boyfriend.”

“Okay. Congratulations, by the way. Is it official?”

“As official as it could be given our reputations.”

“Your... reputations?”

“Ron’s mind has snapped when he learned about your death, and, even if it’s perfectly functional, he’s not the same wizard. Much calmer. He’s also better at Divination. Better than me, even, and I suspect he might have gained an ounce of True Sight in his ordeal. He told me that he was the one who led the others to you, in the park and in the alley. He even showed your scarred face in his crystal ball.”

“Now that you tell this, I remember meeting him. It’s strange, how a part of my mind remembers him as my turbulent best friend, and another one sees him as a calm and collected stranger.”

“Strange. But I’m not finished...”

“Hermione?”

“She stopped speaking with people and drowned herself in her work. It actually saved the school this evening, but the only person she speaks normally with, now, is Snape.”

“Snape? The greasy Potion professor?”

“He’s not that greasy anymore, as he only teaches NEWT level classes. I heard that he liked them best. He got a job as Defence teacher, and does pretty well. The class has been split, though, with an old Auror named Alastor Moody teaching wards, and Remus Lupin got to teach the same amount of Defence as Snape. We have physical education too, with Sirius Black. I will send you some information about them later.”

“Why not now?”

“I don’t know everything, and I think it would be best to meet them to discuss about it. It has something to do with... your history.”

“My history? I want to know! Even if I have my memory back, I have found that I still know next-to-nothing about the magical world or my history in it.”

“I’ll owl you what I have tomorrow. It’s really better to read it, as I can’t sum it all from memory.”

“Thanks, Luna.”

“There are some other things you have to know, before you go to the Hospital wing to check on Ginny.” At these words, Harry rose, ready to run to said place. He hadn’t forgotten about her, but the sheer volume of information was threatening to overwhelm his mind. Luna prevented him, though.

“You are certainly going to see someone in one of the beds.”

“Who? Malfoy?”

“Him? No... I’ll owl you about him too. It’ll be worth reading, I promise you. I was speaking about a girl, who you certainly don’t know. Her name is Megan Prunner.”

“You’re right, I don’t know her.”

“You have to know, so that you don’t gasp too loudly in the Hospital wing, that everyone, and I mean everyone, thought that she was... your sister.”

“My... my sister? Why so?”

“She looks like you in every detail. Well... except that she’s a girl and that you have more scars now.”

“My parents... died, Luna! And I certainly don’t remember having ever had a sister.”

“What do you exactly remember?”

He went silent for a moment, before shaking his head. “I was too young when they died, I don’t remember anything.”

“If you still have memory problems, we could try something, you know.”

“What?”

“Have you ever been hypnotized?”

“No, and I don’t want...”

“Think about it this way: that would be a way to remember your parents.”

He processed the information, before shaking himself. “Perhaps later. I think I’ll go see Ginny now.”

Luna nodded, and they stood up, before heading for the door, ready to leave towards the Hospital wing. He stopped suddenly, remembering something about trekking in the castle after curfew.

“Do you know who got my map?”

“Your map?”

“Yes. It was in my trunk. Surely, someone got it.”

“Harry... your relatives’ house... burned. To the ground. And your trunk must have been there, too. Nothing remained, I’m sorry.”

He blanched suddenly. “My wand!”

Sensing his distress, she put her hand on his shoulder, and tried to reassure him.

“You survived a whole year without one. And you also succeeded in damaging more Dementors in your lightning-wielding winged leonine form than any of the castle defenders, yesterday. I’d say you don’t really need one right now.”

He reflected about that, and acquiesced reluctantly. With his old memories back, he was still feeling naked without it at hand in the castle. He followed Luna around, though, as she seemed to have a keen sense of where to go to avoid Filch and Mrs. Norris.

When they arrived at the Hospital doors, she grasped him a last time, and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s good to have you back, Harry.” she said, looking him in the eye. She then left, humming happily to herself.

When she arrived in front of the Ravenclaw common room entrance, an old man, clad in white, was waiting for her. He addressed her.

“Hath everything gone finely?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I thank thee, Luna Lovegood. Go to sleep, now, and thou will meet somebody special to you in your dreams.”

“Who? Is it... my mum?”

He nodded, smiling benignly.

“Thank you, sir! Thank you.”

She couldn’t help herself and hugged him. He patted her head and then directed her towards her quarters. When the door of Ravenclaw House closed, he muttered something to himself.

“I for sure am not used to intervene directly. But I would not dare losing this one game. Too many lives...”

He looked at the portraits around him, which he had put to sleep upon his arrival, and woke them, just before disappearing.

Harry looked at the doors in apprehension. What if Ginny didn't want him after this year's absence? What if she didn't recognize him? What if...

He shook himself, gathered his courage, and pushed the door silently.

Inside, the only light was coming from the now clear sky, sporting a moon crescent luminous enough to discern the head of each wounded student.

He stopped a moment in front of a bed, where a black-haired girl was sleeping. There was his supposed sister, and he remarked that she really looked like him, in a younger and girly fashion, except for the bandage around her head and shoulder. She had been spying from a classroom when an explosion curse had hit the ceiling, and she had been wounded by fallen rocks. She was okay now, though, breathing deeply. Shaking himself, Harry continued to check the faces and stopped in front of a bed sporting a wild mane of red head.

Ginny Weasley was sleeping, and was apparently in the throes of a nightmare, as small beads of sweat could be seen on her forehead, and she was mumbling incoherently. Unable to let her suffer, he approached her side and stroked her face gently. She calmed instantly, and the smile that graced her features was what Harry had searched after for a whole year.

He was so happy that he felt the familiar tingle of electricity menacing to burst around him. Looking around quickly, he managed to direct it to the metallic goblet that was on the nightstand. It was instantly transformed in a heap of metal, and Harry felt better.

He prodded at her gently, trying to wake her, but she was now soundly asleep, and he didn't want to shake her like a puppet. Looking at her, and remembering that he hadn't been invited in the area, he reflected on a way to stay with her without being detected.

He had two possibilities: he could take her away, or he could adapt himself. He didn't want to kidnap her without her knowing it was him, though, so he decided to change his features. At this point, he had mastered a transformation into a winged lion, as well as a dog and a sparrow. He preferred the feline one, though it sure wasn't discreet enough to be allowed in the Hospital wing. It was also too recognizable, especially after the mess in the Great Hall. Stopping his stroking of Ginny's hand, he reflected about his possibilities, and closed his eyes. Concentrating on each and every memory he had about little cats, and helped by his extensive knowledge of the lion's anatomy, he felt the usual tingle in his whole body. When he opened his eyes afterwards, he could see much better in the semi-darkness, and everything seemed bigger. He jumped on the bed, and nuzzled himself a place in her arm. When he was there, he started to purr contentedly, and Ginny sighed in her sleep, before hugging him closer.

Harry didn't need to sleep, as he had had the time to recover in his hideaway. He then proceeded to meditate, closing his eyes, to sort the information in his mind. He forced himself to examine his memories of when he lived with the Dursleys, and isolated them from the rest of his mind, as a group of thought upon which he could call to anger himself efficiently. Ginny was stirring in her sleep, so, after having done that, he purred again, and started to explore his other memories, most of them happier.

He brought forth his memories of his friends, and separated the wizarding ones from the others. After all, he had lived two different lives, so it was better to store the different memories in distinct places. He then updated his knowledge of the wizardry world with what Luna had told him. He also reflected that he had to add a separate area for elemental-related memories.

As he was organizing his memories, he was always annoyed to discover stray ones moving from a group to another. Thinking about it, he decided to imagine his thoughts as being mutttons, him being the shepherd, and resolved to build a fence around them. To his surprise, the already ordered thoughts stopped moving from one group to another, and the jumble of his other memories didn't try to invade the ordered groups anymore.

He wanted to think more about this, but the sun was rising already, and people were stirring. The first morning call was made by a first year Hufflepuff, who suddenly sat on her bed, screaming in fright for a second before realizing where she was. She had been in the Great Hall and had been wounded by a knife there.

The shout woke most of the room, though, and made Madam Pomfrey appear in the room quite quickly. She first calmed the crying girl, before making her first round of the magically enlarged room. Some students got woken up to drink a potion or two, while others weren't touched at all. Sadly, she had to levitate two of the beds out of the room to the mortuary. Everyone got inspected, though, and when the matron went to check on Ginny, she was surprised to see her sleeping with a smile on her face. No other student was smiling, especially after yesterday's attack!

Looking closely, she remarked that the teen was holding something furry in her arms, and tried to remove it, when she got a shock. The thing was moving, and a cat head looked at her inquiringly. It was a black cat, with vibrant green eyes. She suddenly didn't know what to do. Normally, pets and animals weren't accepted in her infirmary. However, the sleeping girl seemed so happy to hold the purring feline that she couldn't bring herself to remove it. While she was thinking this, the cat looked at her fixedly. It unnerved her that a cat could destabilize her like that, and she quickly cast her detection spell on Ginny before turning towards the next bed, intent on finishing her round. Just as she was leaving the bedside, though, she remarked the now cold lump of metal on the nightstand. She took it, briefly asking herself what it could be, before dropping it in the nearest trashcan.

When Ginny woke up, some time afterwards, Harry had just left. He had had a sudden thought about Ginny yelling his name upon seeing him, even as a cat. The thought finished on everybody discovering him, something he didn't want yet. He had then jumped off the bed, before hiding under the cupboard. The movement had woken up Ginny, though, and she looked around in sleep-filled wonder. She knew that something was missing, but couldn't place it, as everything was at the same place as the day before. Nevertheless, she had

spent a globally good night, filled with a few nightmares and many dreams as well. The images of them were fading rapidly, though, and she didn't have the time to notice that they hadn't been hers.

After Madam Pomfrey's clearance, she left for the breakfast, unaware of the black cat that was following her, hidden in the shadows of the corridors and of the Great Hall afterwards. The atmosphere was subdued, as everyone was remembering the carnage of the day before. Ginny took her usual place at the table, before noticing that Ron and Hermione were both sitting next to her. She greeted them, and started to eat.

A few minutes afterwards, a large flock of owls could be seen arriving in the Hall, as every parent who had read the morning copy of the Daily Prophet wanted to have news of their offspring.

Several owls were flying aimlessly in the room, obviously trying to find someone, when McGonagall reacted and stood up, before using the powers of her position to send these owls to her office. She would answer personally to those who had lost someone.

A school owl was flying aimlessly too, but not in the flock that had been sent away. That one was flying around Ginny, hooting in disappointment. When he noticed this, Ron's eyes lit up, and he looked at the Ravenclaw table, where Luna had stood up and was walking toward them. He offered his hand to the owl, and gave it to Luna without glancing at the envelope.

"I believe," he said to Ginny, but loudly enough to be heard by a couple other students, "that the person whom Luna wanted to write to must be somewhere else."

Ginny answered. "What do you mean?"

But Ron had returned to his bacon. Ginny turned around to ask to Luna, but the Ravenclaw girl had left already, patting the owl.

A few seconds afterwards, a scuffle and admiring exclamations could be heard from the table's end nearest from the doors.

Earlier that morning, Megan Prunner had been cleared by Madam Pomfrey and had joined the breakfasting Hall. After the mail incident, during which she had sulked about her parents being non-magical thus unable to owl her, she had noticed the strange owl farther but had dismissed it as one of the numerous strange occurrences related to Gryffindor's resident fool. A few seconds afterwards, she had sensed something near her foot and, quick and nimble as a she was, she had suddenly bent and retrieved a small black ball of living fur. Turning it around, she noticed two things: it was a cat, and it had vibrant green eyes which looked back at her.

Megan opened her mouth in surprise, and the cat appeared to be surprised as well, while Megan's neighbouring girls fawned over its cuteness. The small cat had exactly the same colour of eyes as she had. Reflecting about it, she noticed that the small animal's fur was also the same colour as her hair, and was sticking in places like her. Looking closer at the animal's eyes, she could see that they were changing, that the animal's vertical pupils slowly changed to round ones. She was looking at it in wonder, when someone from behind her grasped the cat in a flash, and ran out of the hall. Recognising the person, she yelled, at the same time as someone else behind her.

"Ronald Weasley!"

Turning around, she noticed that Ginny Weasley was standing, pale, next to her seat. The older girl approached her and fidgeted for a few seconds. Megan sensed that she wanted to ask her something, so she tried to encourage her.

"Yes?"

"You know him?"

"Your brother? Not a chance."

"No, not him... Him."

"Who?"

Ginny sighed exasperatedly, and seemed to think for a moment, tapping on the floor with her foot, before taking a decision. She grasped the girl's elbow and led her out of the Hall. A few seconds afterwards, Luna left too, the owl gone but its package in her hands. Understanding that something was going on, Hermione, stood up too and left the room, closely followed by the Weasley twins.

Ginny led Megan for a few stairs, before the younger girl yanked her arm off the other's grasp.

"What are you on?"

"Shhh, come on, I can't talk about this in public..."

"There is nobody now, you can talk."

"False. Muggles say 'walls have ears' but here, they have eyes also." Ginny answered, nodding at the portraits.

Looking around them, Megan understood. The portraits were looking at them with curious expressions, and everything that was said there wouldn't be a secret. She relented.

"Okay. Lead the way."

Both girls got up the stairs until they reached an empty corridor. There, Ginny stopped Megan and started to pace, to the younger girl's annoyance.

"What are you doing?"

Ginny didn't answer, but, to Megan's amazement, a door appeared in the wall. The castle was full of surprises, she reflected, before following Ginny inside.

Inside, a small and cosy room was lit by a fire roaring in the chimney. Eight chairs were put in a circle, and Ron was sitting on one, apparently waiting for them. Ginny started to talk, but he stopped her.

“Please sit. We are not complete.”

That made the girls think, and they sat. A few seconds afterwards, Luna entered the room, and she held the door open for the three students who she knew would be following her. When Hermione and the twins entered the room, they looked at it in wonder.

Fred started, “I never knew...”

“...that there was a room on this floor.” George completed. The twins still had the annoying habit of completing each other’s sentences. They had flaunted their knowledge of the castle time and again, and were quite floored that there was some room they didn’t know about.

“What are we here for?” asked Hermione.

Ron looked at Luna, who nodded at him. Addressing the others, he started. “Sit down, and we will tell you.”

They sat, while Megan asked warily. “You said we weren’t complete but I still see an empty chair.”

“True.” Ron answered, but he didn’t elaborate. It was true, of course, as the eighth chair, between him and Luna, was empty.

Megan began to be fed up of the situation, and, turning towards Ginny, she talked to her. “Why did you drag me here?”

Ginny answered, throwing uneasy glances towards Ron. “I wanted to talk to you alone, but my loony of a brother seemed to have other ideas.”

“Right.” Ron interjected. “Rather than giving each other false ideas and hopes, I preferred to call for a little get-together.”

“Which means?”

“During the short time between my arrival and yours, I discussed with someone who had agreed with my idea. I’ll be blunt. Harry’s here.”

Luna knew it, and turned to look at the others.

Megan hadn’t known Harry, so she was looking around in bewilderment.

Hermione was her usual logical self, so she scowled and started to mutter about incoherent fools.

The twins were looking at Ron like he had grown a second head.

Ginny almost fainted, but managed to grasp her chair, before looking at him, pale, partly hopeful, and partly angry.

Ron was looking at her, and at her only, though, when he spoke again.

“Rather than to discuss about it, I propose that our eighth member make himself known. Harry, if you would?”

Ron had glanced around his seat, and everyone craned their neck to see what was behind it. They weren’t prepared, then, when a small cat appeared from under Ron’s chair, walked uneasily towards the eighth chair and jumped on it.

Megan couldn’t understand anything of the scene, and, looking around, saw that the older redheads and Hermione weren’t either. Ginny, however, seemed to recognize something, and that was what made her retreat in her seat. ‘Let’s see what happens next’ she thought.

And she thought well, because the seating cat closed his green eyes and his body expanded until a boy stood in its place, head hung.

Nobody said anything.

He raised his head, and sharp intakes of breath could be heard as they noticed the scars and burnt skin.

He looked at them with his only eye, before setting it on Ginny. He spoke, and his raspy voice startled them, as well as the uneasy tone underlying it.

“Hmmm... hi?”

Nobody could answer, because Ginny had launched herself on him, throwing the chair on the ground in the process. Neither Harry or Ginny thought of standing, though, as they were hugging like long-lost lovers. Luna and Ron, who had sat nearest, stood up and retreated a little to avoid the small shockwaves that still came from Harry.

Luna spoke first. “You really have to master this, Harry.”

That broke the silence, and the four unknowing occupants started to ask questions at the same time. The ruckus seemed to bring the attention of the hugging teens on their audience and uncomfortable situation.

After helping the couple up, Ron merged two chairs before sitting on the last free one. Harry and Ginny, sat comfortably in the large chair, and Ron took control of the situation again.

“You okay, mate?”

Harry smiled, before nodding, nuzzling Ginny’s hair in contentment.

Hermione looked at Ron strangely. “Ron?”

“Yes, Mione?”

“Are you... back?”

“I know what you mean, Mione. My answer is: Yes... and no.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have all been scarred, and I have had my share. I guess that finding Harry brought some sense in that loony’s head.” he pointed towards his own head. “But I’ll never be the same as before. You know,” he sighed, “we formed a bond between us, by sharing all these experiences, and when Harry supposedly died...”

“It sure felt like it.” Harry muttered darkly, before having his hand squeezed by the pretty red-headed girl next to him.

Everyone fell into an embarrassed silence for a few seconds, before Ron continued. “We have been specializing ourselves in the group. You were the logical brain, Hermione, and I guess I was the emotional one. Harry was... the bravery, I suppose. When we ‘separated,’ the only conjecture I can make is that each of us took his part from the others.”

“Are we... are we friends?”

“Yes, don’t worry. We weren’t really a couple before, and I think you have higher aspirations.”

Hermione’s face displayed several emotions, one after the other: relief at finding both her friends back, alive, and seemingly well; sadness at the trials they had to go through; embarrassment at being known in such depth by someone she had frequently called a lunatic. She stood uneasily, and Ron went to her so that they hugged. Not like lovers, but like long-lost friends. Hermione, her emotional part rekindled, resolved then to spend more time with them.

Remembering the summer, she sniffed. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“I’m sorry to have pushed you out.” he answered, knowing what she talked about.

After they separated, Megan piped in. “Not to bother you guys, but I still don’t know why I’m here.”

They all looked at her, and Harry cleared his throat, before answering. "I guess that the presentations had been skipped in our meeting. I'm Harry Potter, nice to meet you."

She looked at him. She had heard what everyone had said in the year, about their physical similarities. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to ignore the scars, but he surprised her, and everyone, again. "Wait a second."

He then bent his head forward, hiding his face. Unseen to all, he closed his eye and frowned in concentration. When he raised his head, a scar-less Harry Potter looked back at them.

Everyone gasped. Megan was even on the verge of fainting. Fred and George were the first to react vocally.

"Blimey, Harry..."

"...that is wicked! So, you are a metamorphmagus..."

"...on top of being an animagus?"

Remembering the trip back from the previous year, Hermione interjected. "Or does it have another name?"

Harry looked at Ginny, and smiled, remembering the last happy days before the previous summer, before turning towards Hermione. "I'll take my book's definition and say I'm a shape-shifter."

Turning serious for a second, he addressed them all. "I'd like you to keep it secret for the moment, as well as my arrival here. I have to sort my situation before 'announcing' my return to everybody." He looked intently at Hermione, who wanted to express something. "Tell the staff about my presence if you want but, please, nothing else."

He turned towards Megan, and winked at her. "Here is how I would appear if a dark wizard hadn't taken a sudden interest in me so many years ago, making me live in a wretched place where I got murdered."

He realized his mistake the moment he uttered it. Ginny began to cry in his shoulder, while Hermione stood up suddenly, demanding the whole story. Ron calmed her, and Harry, remembering Luna's words, turned toward Megan again. "So, many people told you that you looked like me? That you were my sister?"

She nodded. She had been surprised at the change in his face, and couldn't speak a word as the face she was looking at appeared like hers, although older and male.

Hermione spoke at that moment, her mind always questing for information. "I wonder if there is a way to know."

Surprised, Harry looked at her, frowning and remembering, before answering. "There is a way."

Hermione looked at him in wonder. "How can you say that?"

"Blood magic."

She froze. Everyone froze, except Ron and Luna, who were looking at the exchange with peaceful faces.

Hermione reacted first. "How can you even suggest that? It's the most advanced field of Alchemy, and..."

Ron chose that moment to tease her. "How do you know?"

She blushed, remembering her endless discussions with Snape about Potions. Sometimes, Dumbledore had joined them, and the topic would then tilt a little towards Alchemy.

Harry answered her plainly. "My dear ancestor, whose name you should know by now, wrote about blood magic in that famous book."

Hermione interrupted him again. "What do you mean, we know his name? And where is that book, now?"

Harry turned towards Luna. "Luna?"

“I told Harry his house burned down. It seems his trunk was there, with everything in it.”

“So, I don’t know, Hermione. I lost my trunk, my wand, the map, and everything else. But I remember the book perfectly. With time, I could write its content.”

She looked imploringly at him. “Will you?”

“I said ‘with time’ and I think there are more pressing matters. Like actually using blood magic between us.” he finished, looking towards Megan, who recoiled a little. He corrected himself immediately. “It’s not dangerous. You just have to give a drop of blood.”

“You are not going to do strange things, like possessing me?” Megan spoke in a little voice. After all, she had just encountered the boy, and she didn’t know him.

His crooked smile, though, the same as hers, appeased her before his words. “I won’t. It’s just a detection spell.”

Pushing Ginny aside after kissing her hair, he sat up and addressed Ron. “Can I have a cup, a knife, and your wand?” He then remembered the events of a year ago, and corrected himself. “Well... not your wand, in fact.”

Remembering the state of his wand the previous year, Ron laughed. A real laugh, which drew everyone’s attention apart from Harry and Luna. He hadn’t laughed for a year, they thought, and it made them smile as well.

“Don’t worry, Harry. It had been repaired and works well, now.”

“In fact, speaking of wands, I wonder which of yours I’d be more attuned with. Can I?”

Everyone passed their wands to him in turn. With the usual move learned from doing it countless times at Ollivander’s, he only got

some sparks from Megan's and Ginny's. During this, Ron had concentrated on the image of a small table with a little knife and a small cup. They were in a room which was called the Room of Requirements, and the room adapted itself to the needs of the people there. Ron had found it on a fluke, and had used it a few times since then.

Harry chose Ginny's wand, and prepared to cut himself with the knife. At the last moment, he looked at Hermione. "You can heal that, right?"

She understood he spoke about little knife cuts, and nodded.

He cut his left thumb, and let some drops fall in the cup, before raising his hand. Meanwhile, Hermione had cleaned the knife and given it to Megan.

Harry looked at his bleeding thumb in fascination for a second, and Luna glanced at him uneasily. He then brought it to his lips, and licked it.

Blood!

Alas, only his own... not as interesting as others'.

He shook himself, freeing himself of these strange thoughts. He definitely had to finish ordering his mind, he thought. Hermione was looking at him with her hand out, asking him something.

"What?"

"Your hand. You asked me to heal, remember?"

"Oh, right."

He gave her his hand, palm up. She took it warily, and looked at it for a second, before returning it. Looking at Harry, she said "You're healed already."

“Ah? I guess I healed it, then.” He smiled innocently at her, but she wasn’t convinced that he had told the truth. During this, Megan had let some of her blood drop in the cup.

Taking Ginny’s proffered wand, he approached the cup and straightened up. “Here comes nothing.” he said, before starting to chant some ancient words while drawing a convoluted Y-shaped figure with the wand.

Smoke began to rise from the cup, and formed a strange-looking shape. Harry looked at it, his eyes wide. “It’s not possible.” he muttered. And he fainted, dropping the wand.

And disappeared.

In the shocked silence that ensued, everybody could hear Luna speaking. “I wish he stops doing that, it’s becoming quite annoying.”

To be continued in next chapter: New Beginnings...

Satisfied? I’d bet you are.  
Alas, the plot I won’t mar  
There is always more to write,  
You’ll see... a most evil rite.

## Chapter 27 – New beginnings

The school was in upheaval. The day before, two students had been witnessed falling from the roof. The school janitor, one of the few witnesses that had been in the line of sight of the whole fall because he was cleaning outside, had also reported that the two students had disappeared into thin air and that one of them had wings like an angel. His tale, however, had been dismissed because of his known drinking habits, even if he had been being sober at that moment. The teachers and the other officials on site hadn't found any corpse, though, and they had taken the roll of the whole school, before closing it for investigation. They had found the small note on the roof, under a pebble, and had judged it noteworthy to categorize the fall as a suicide. Without a body, though, they were hard-pressed to name the fallen. Even with the description given by most of the witnesses, they could only take a guess between the dozen-or-so students deemed absent after the happenstance that day.

Joan was seething. She was at her place with Kevin and Jason, and they had had no news of Gabriel and Tamara. She had suspected something happening to those two, and the school closing because of the double-suicide-without-corpse prevented her to investigate herself. When she had heard that the investigation found a note, she had proposed her help to remove Tamara and Gabriel from the list of the possible victims. After being dismissed by the policemen guarding the school, she had gone back home with her friends, cursing the whole way, unaware of the stares that people threw her way.

There, they had waited, and waited. To try to ease the waiting, Kevin proposed to play a game, but was rewarded by a dark glance from Joan and a mute refusal from Jason. To Kevin's disappointment, Jason then proposed to read a book, and Joan went in her room to fetch some books that could be read lightly. Once there, she saw the wood planks propped against her full bookcase, and remembered that Gabriel had proposed to build her some larger shelves to hold her books and other things. Tears began to fall softly from her eyes, and she moved the four planks outside of her room, in order to access her books. She also moved the ironing table which was inconveniently placed in the middle of her room, before taking a pile

of books, comics, and other reading material, and heading down to her two waiting friends.

So they read. For two hours. Around midday, the phone rang noisily, eliciting a yelp from Joan and making Kevin fall from his unstable position on the armchair's armrest. Jason stood up and answered it, Joan still being nervous and Kevin soothing her. After all, Jason was always the calm and collected one of the lot.

"Freyrs' residence, what can I do for you?"

"What are you doing there, Jason?" asked a young teenager's voice from the other end.

"TAM?"

The shout brought the other two to the telephone and they started to ask questions frantically, before registering Jason's annoyed gaze. After they calmed, he took the receiver again.

"Tam, can you meet us here or do you want us to come?"

Through the speaker, they heard the sound of a heated discussion between Tamara and a male voice they suspected of being her father's. After a few minutes, she spoke to the phone again.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

The line clicked empty. The three teenagers looked at themselves uneasily. If they had heard correctly, Tamara's father wanted to move away with her. Why would he want to do that when they knew, through Tamara, that he was successful in his local business?

They waited again. And waited yet again. Fifteen minutes is a long time when you have only unanswerable questions in your mind.

When the doorbell rang, Kevin and Joan threw themselves at the door, and managed, through a scramble, to open it. Behind, an amused Tamara looked at them, before being squeezed in a bear

hug by two of her friends. Jason, always calm, looked at her amusingly from the doorway, and shrugged at the others' antics.

After being released, able to breathe again, he hugged her, more gently this time, and they all entered. After a little small talk about her current health condition, Kevin asked her the unavoidable question.

"So, Tam. Enough chit-chat. What happened?"

She looked uneasily around, then at Joan.

"Is your dad home?"

Joan didn't understand why she asked this, but answered anyway. "No. Not for a few hours."

Tamara seemed to relax, if only a little. "I need a drink, before continuing."

When Joan rose and went to fetch a soda from the fridge, Tamara looked at her pointedly. Not wholly understanding her glance, Joan brought the bottle and four glasses.

"Joan?"

"Yes?"

Her next sentence floored them. "I need a drink. I know your father has some Laphroaig..."

Joan looked at her, astonished. Everyone looked at her. Unbeknownst to them, a fire elemental could drink any alcohol without feeling the after-effects of it.

"I need it, please? It's a long story, and I know I won't be sick."

Awakening from her inertia, Joan fetched the bottle in the low cupboard next the chimney, and served her. Tamara swallowed it like she would a glass of milk, before smacking her lips. Dumbfounded,

Joan served her again, but Tamara let it on the table. She had to explain, now.

“Well... I don’t know where to start.”

“Where is Gabriel, for instance?” asked Joan.

“Good idea, yes, although... I don’t know. I suppose he’s safe, though.”

“You suppose?”

“What are you doing here, in any case? It’s a school day.” asked Tamara.

“School had been closed, after the suicide.” answered Jason.

Tamara looked at them inquiringly. “Suicide?”

“Yes, we heard about two students who jumped from the roof.”

Tamara then got the oddest reaction. After a couple of seconds blinking owlshly, she started to laugh, to the point where she fell on the floor in mirth. The others looked at each other, not understanding. Collecting herself, Tamara looked at them and calmed herself before sitting down again.

“Were there any witnesses? Any strange recounting?”

“We heard that the janitor... you know? The drunken one? He saw an angel disappearing.”

Tamara’s gaze went blank and she muttered absentmindedly. “Yes, that’s how he looked like.”

The others looked at her, flabbergasted. Jason was the first to shake himself awake. “Would you care to elaborate?”

She looked at them, and seemed to take a decision. "What I will tell you require the greatest secrecy. You understand? No retelling of it to anyone."

They all nodded.

"I may even betray Gabriel a little by telling you all this, but, given the circumstances... Remember Halloween?"

They all nodded again.

She took a deep breath. She was going to be direct. "Well... Gabriel is a wizard."

The reactions were different. Stunned, Joan had her jaw hanging. Kevin had risen, yelling "I knew it!"

Jason looked at her, waiting for the rest, as he thought she was going to explain. He was disappointed when she spoke again.

"I'm not going to explain much, because I feel it's not my place to do so. Anyways, let me begin by the roof incident..."

They settled comfortably, waiting for the story.

"After the sport class, I was late for my English period, and I was running in the corridor when the jocks found me." The others felt the disgust thrown in the word, and knew immediately who she was referring to.

"They dragged me on the roof and began to ask me questions about Gabriel. He apparently disappeared before them, and they were angry because they had wanted to fight him."

Seeing that they wanted to ask questions, she raised her hand. "I'll explain more later."

When they settled back, she continued. "When I wouldn't answer, they struck me until I was unconscious. From what I gathered afterwards, they tried to... to..."

She couldn't quite tell them that she had almost been raped on that roof, but Joan, to her surprise, understood immediately. The sharp intake of breath, the widened eyes, and the shocked expression were indication enough. She wondered for an instant about how she could know so easily, but attributed it to feminine intuition and went on to the tale.

"Anyway... they couldn't do much, because Gabriel appeared at that moment. I don't remember what happened exactly, but we were thrown off the roof together."

The others blinked at her owlishly, and, were the situation not so serious, she could have laughed. She merely smiled, before continuing.

"That's when Gabriel did something. In mid-fall, he magically transported us both in his hideaway."

"WHAT?" the three others answered, before asking multiple questions at the same time.

She smirked, and raised her hand to ask for silence. When they complied, she spoke again, her hand still raised to prevent them from interrupting.

"There is a set of rooms he owns, without doors or windows. He explained to me that the only mean to enter or leave them is through magic." She wasn't ready to talk about his ring or his previous demonstration of it to her. Furthermore, she didn't want to speak about her stay there without him nor his animal transformation.

"To make a long story short, he then took me to a building he knew, and it was a magical school, which he seemed to remember quite well, even if his memory was still incomplete."

Sensing that the others were bubbling with questions, she raised her other hand. The next part was a complete lie, so she didn't want to be interrupted while telling it.

"After touring it for some time, he then took me home, before going back to his hideaway. We both were really tired, physically and mentally, and he wanted to sleep before coming back for explanations. My father... happened to notice us appearing from thin air, and he wants to move away. I'm not even allowed to speak about it to him, and I'd rather you don't either."

She lowered her hands, took a sip of her glass, and looked at them. She knew that her next sentence would raise endless strings of questions, but she uttered it nonetheless. "That's quite all."

And she was true. She spent the next hour trying to answer questions while at the same time hiding a large slab of the truth. However, they were so shocked by the story that they didn't notice, and kept asking her question after question.

Until they heard a crashing sound upstairs.  
Hogwarts' Room of Requirements...

"Harry!" shrieked Ginny.

The others looked around uneasily.

Ron then spoke. "I gather he still has his escape route. Each time he falls unconscious, he disappears. I guess we will have to wait for him to wake up, wherever he is, before he joins us again."

"But will he want to come back?" asked Megan. She was still unsure of the whole thing, especially the still-looming cloud of smoke on top of the cup, from which the blood had disappeared.

Hermione involuntarily interrupted the discussion. She had been thinking about something again, and her mind had come up with a striking conclusion. "Oh my god!"

The other six occupants looked at her inquiringly. She went to explain, but a knock at the door startled them all. Fred went to the door, and opened it to reveal the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore, complete with the body around them.

He glanced at the room, and, noticing the empty eighth chair, asked "Were you waiting for me?"

They all looked between them uneasily, wondering if the old teacher was to be notified of the secret. Hermione, knowing the old man better than the others, took the decision.

"No sir. That was Harry's chair."

The old man understood, but the story around Harry seemed so unreal that he had to ask for a confirmation. "Seeing the group here, I can assume that you were speaking about Mr Potter."

They nodded, most of them smiling.

Nonplussed, Dumbledore continued to reflect for a few seconds, before talking again. "I would like to know how..."

That's when Dumbledore noticed the smoke cloud on the table. He frowned, interrupting himself, and approached. Taking in the knife as well, he looked at Hermione, who he had unconsciously appointed head of the group.

"Who did that?"

The tone wasn't quite gentle. Surprised, Hermione still felt inclined to tell the truth.

"Harry, sir." She then proceeded to tell him about the experience with Harry's and Megan's bloods, and the fact that Harry seemed to know the ritual pretty well. Over her talking, Dumbledore relaxed more and more, losing his cold attitude. Hermione wanted to know

the reason behind the professor's frown, though, so she asked if it was a dark spell.

"It's not dark, Hermione. There are only very few spells really dark. Most of the time, what is dark is the use we make of them. Blood magic is quite powerful, you see, and its use can be seen as dark by many bigoted people. That's why it's mostly taught in the magical colleges, as a specialty in Alchemy. It's not something I thought I'd see in a school, especially not mine. However, many dark practitioners use it for illegal purposes which I won't list here. I was just surprised to find this here.

"As I said, the field encompassing Blood magic is Alchemy, and one of the most infamous related stories about that field is the creation of the Philosopher's Stone, which you know about since your first year, sadly. Still, I'm wondering how Harry got this education. In fact, I'm wondering about the whole elapsed year."

"Sir?" Hermione looked lost in her thoughts, and spoke as if she was thinking aloud, which she was. "Harry told us he found it in the book left to him by his ancestor."

"Professor Shaun?" interrupted the old teacher, before being silenced by her. She was following her own train of thoughts, again.

"No, he didn't say the name, only that we might know the ancestor's name, now. Unless he was talking to me only... as if challenging me. I don't know, sir, you saw him, and..."

"I didn't see him, Hermione."

She suddenly looked up at him. "Actually, you did, and everyone else too! I remember, now! It was him in the Great Hall!"

"You don't mean..."

"Yes. It's the only explanation. And his form explains everything."

"The winged lion?"

“Who do we know has a winged lion on its crest? A golden griffin, to be exact?”

Ginny looked up, suddenly. All her talks with Harry from a year ago came back full force. Her eyes misted at the revelation. “Gryffindor. Godric Gryffindor.”

“Exactly.”

“Harry is a descendant of Gryffindor?” blurted Megan. When the others, while not seeming convinced due to the enormity of the fact, nodded, she was impressed. Like all muggleborns, she had learned about the Founders in her first weeks of school, and knew that they were rumoured to be the most powerful wizards and witches to have lived, apart from Merlin himself.

Tentatively, not knowing the result of the spell Harry had performed, she spoke again. “Does it mean that I’m one too?”

The wrinkled and white-bearded Transfiguration Professor looked up suddenly, alternating glances toward her and toward the smoke cloud which was beginning to dissipate.

“What did Harry told you about this?”

Hermione drew a deep intake of breath before launching on her explanation. “When we talked about Megan’s sisterly resemblance to him, he told us he knew how to be sure. He and Megan dropped some of their blood, and... Sir?”

Dumbledore had heard everything, and had already jumped to the conclusion. Gaping, he could only look at Megan, his eyes wide, and the amused twinkling completely gone. Instead, there was astonishment, and sorrow. Nobody from the room had ever seen the old man like this.

Hermione, despite the strangeness of the situation, deemed it safe to continue the tale. "Harry cast a spell on the blood, and when he saw the result, he fainted and... disappeared."

Albus Dumbledore was staring at the place where the smoke cloud had evaporated, listening to the explanation and frowning. The last word threw him off balance, and he glanced at Hermione pointedly.

"Disappeared? While unconscious?"

"Yes, sir. It seems that he has a mean of escape each time he's unconscious. It had happened four times already. That is, four times we are aware of." She started to count on her fingers. "In the alleyway where we met his winged lion form for the first time. At the battle for Hogwarts, against the Death Eaters. In the Great Hall. And now."

Dumbledore was frowning. Ginny moved uneasily, trying to catch his eye. When she succeeded, she looked pointedly at the girl next to her, who was still looking at him with wide eyes, waiting for a reply. He sighed internally. This was going to be difficult to manage, afterwards. Especially now that Harry was back. After all, it was his fault that the young boy had been left in the care of murderers.

"The spell he did cast gives one shape per tested blood family."

Megan seemed lost, while the others looked at Dumbledore in astonishment. The first year had waited for a simple answer and couldn't parse the old man's sentence. Seeing her state, Hermione clarified.

"You are, Megan. You actually are Harry's sister."

The young girl fainted. And someone knocked.  
In a deserted cemetery...

"Go on! I'm fed up of this rotten form!"

"You heard the master! Make those flobberworms dig faster!"

The Death Eaters had captured a few muggles men nearby, after having played with their wives and children. They had then cast Imperious on them, and, guided by Jugson, had forced them to dig a particular grave up. The black-robed wizards had nothing against blood, but didn't want to get dirt on themselves. Add to that the fact that they weren't quite physically fit, and actually liked to use that curse on people. They were Death Eaters, after all.

On the gravestone, there was only a name. Tom Riddle. Each time he looked at it, Voldemort sneered. His damned father, who he had killed himself, would have his use, finally. He reflected about his youth for a time. His accursed youth. Rejected by his father, he had been placed in an orphanage and spent ten years belittled by the adults and bullied by the other kids. He had taken his revenge on both after graduating from Hogwarts, though. His father had been the first to taste his Avada Kedavra, and the orphanage was now a stinking ruin.

An exclamation from Jugson brought him to the present. They had found the decaying coffin! He told Jugson only to bring back the necessary bones and to leave the rest there, under the earth. Including the muggles.

He then levitated his chair around to sit near the simmering cauldron, next to which stood his yet-unnamed ally. The man seemed so old and parched that one could think he would crumble to dust at the smallest breeze. However, his eyes denied this, full as they were with experience and wisdom.

Not only Voldemort's current body was not his own, but it was also rotting slowly. The natural body functions had been neglected for too long, due to the full possession, and Barty Crouch Jr had died while being possessed. Thankfully, Voldemort had imbibed the antidote to the usual 'Death Eater' quick rotting potion while the body was alive, as he couldn't benefit from potions anymore in his current state. As a parasite in a spirit form, Voldemort could have sustained the body's functions, but he would have had to do so consciously, and it hadn't lasted long before he totally stopped, concentrating on a way to get his own body back rather than operating lungs and sphincters.

Jugson was near the cauldron, now. Good servant.

“Bones of the father.” he said, while putting the bones in the silver cauldron. At the same time, his wizened ally started to chant the spell incantation. A jar of blood, taken from the now very dead Bill Weasley while the blood was fresh, was emptied in the simmering cauldron.

“Blood of the enemy.”

Voldemort then looked at Jugson with interest in his eyes. The last part required that the servant sacrifice a body part, and Jugson brought his wand on his own arm, trembling.

A perfectly aimed Cutting curse later, Jugson took his bleeding forearm and threw it in the cauldron.

“Flesh...” he gasped, “of a... servant.”

He then collapsed. Voldemort stirred. It was time! He rose, his ghostly form separating from Crouch’s body. The corpse then fell on the ground, decaying so fast, now, that it was reduced to mere bones in a matter of minutes. That didn’t interest Voldemort, though, as his spirit got called inside the cauldron where the dark magic was at work.

The other Death Eaters, their job done, came around the working space, where Jugson was lying and bleeding, the cauldron was simmering, and the old man was muttering, his wand raised towards the cauldron. After a few minutes, the cauldron began to shake violently, before exploding. In its place, a body slowly rose from his crouched position. The old man moved at the same time, and covered the scaly body in a robe fitting his station. Voldemort was truly alive, again. And he was decided to make a good use of it. In a small room...

This time, the walls merely displayed landscape tapestries. The two doors opened at the same time. The two persons walked in silence towards the central chess board, each eyeing the other wearily. On

the board, the pieces were still moving by themselves, obeying strange rules. It wasn't a regular chess game, as pieces morphed themselves into others, and sometimes more than one moved at the same time. After a few minutes watching, the old man spoke softly.

"I see that thou art readying thyself."

The other snorted, politeness not being his forte. "Speak for yourself, you are doing the same."

"Ready or not, I think that our final battle will happen soon."

"Easy to say. Don't forget that I prepared my pieces as much as you do."

"I have noticed, do not worry thyself unnecessarily. I am prepared."

"Speaking of noticing, I couldn't miss the tinge of creation coming from your young hero."

"Attuned to thy domain as thou art, thou for sure couldst not miss that." The old man grinned.

The seemingly younger one frowned. "I couldn't miss it? It's an understatement! You used his severed state to connect him directly to your domain. He's dripping with life! And each time he should die, he gains more!" He sighed. "I may have had words with my pieces, but you gave yours advantages I can't go against!"

"I heard about thine words and items, too. Truly, calling thyself Thirteen! Thou waddlest in the symbols too much, I say."

"I play the game as I see fit! And you 'waddle' in the old tongue too much! I should have kept that Shake-something soul instead of letting you have it."

"Shakespeare is the name! And thou knowest that all creators go to me. Now wait, werst thou complaining about the game ere? Am I being unfair?"

“Not quite, since we both signed this game’s rules. However, I’m wondering...” he looked at the old man pointedly. “There have been a couple of noteworthy deaths that I never saw arriving in my realm. Are you hiding something from me?”

“What dost thou mean?”

The young-looking androgyne looked at the old man inquiringly. “I wonder if you kept some souls for yourself, to... I don’t know... cheer your pieces when needed.”

His older counterpart looked at him, reflecting. “I do not know what thou meanest. Which souls?”

“Come one... You know... Your little protégé’s parents...”

The old man looked at him with wide eyes, before answering. “I can assure thee that I never saw them nor ordered their admittance. You know they didn’t invent anything. Why?”

“Since the beginning of our game, I’ve searched for them. I admit that I had wanted to use them, but I didn’t find them. To make my search thorough, after the gardens, I also visited my pits. I didn’t see them there either. I was curious, so I peered through my account logs, something I do rarely...”

While the other one was nodding, indicating that he didn’t read them often either, he continued. “...and I also noticed that there were fewer souls there than expected.”

“How many?” asked the old man, frowning.

“I don’t know exactly, and I didn’t go far back in time, but a really great number. In the last twenty years, roughly ten thousands are missing from the count. Mostly magical, with a few elementals and some of our servants. It wasn’t showing, though, due to the already large population in my grounds.”

The old man was thoughtful, and didn't comment for a time. Noticing the impatient expression of his younger counterpart, he answered.

"I do not know about this. Thou knowest that it shall not be? Thou hast been given the key of thy ever-growing domain at the same time as I did, and thy job since then had been clear: administering the souls of the dead. However, if thou commencest to be bereaved of them like this, the Superintendent might not be pleased."

"You can talk! Have you noticed the chaos on the ball of dirt we have to manage? When they arrive, some of them souls even blame it to me, before understanding our divisions. You are the Creator, but if I have my word, you create too much. They are on the verge of eating themselves, I tell you!"

The tone was quickly mounting now, and they were arguing like their charges may do in their worst days.

"Whatever dost thou mean again? I insisted on giving them free will, and I nurtured them..."

"At the beginning, yes! Thank you to have provided me with some more substance than reptilian minds. But look at what that had left us with! Rabbits, all of them. Worse, even, as rabbits wouldn't poison their air, water, and other natural resources. I swear, if I win this game, I'll clean the half of them in one go."

"Thou canst not actually clean them out, thou knowest."

"I'll get my next protégé do the job, and that's the same! They are even limiting your own creations, by destroying species after endangered species."

The bantering went back and forth for quite a long time, as the two opponents exchanged their point of view and more. Unaware of the heated exchange, the chess pieces were moving on the unattended chequered board.

Hogwarts' Room of Requirements, again...

Minerva McGonagall entered the room, panting. Obviously, the old witch had been running.

“Albus! I...”

She stopped, taking the students in, especially the collapsed one and the red-haired girl who was tending her.

Smiling, Dumbledore asked “Minerva? What is it about?”

Glancing uneasily at the other ones, she started again. “The device for the intrusion, Albus! I forgot it in my quarters, behind my office, and I found only now that there had been two more entries.”

Albus Dumbledore thought fast about it, and began to chuckle.

“It’s alright, Minerva, really.” He added the last word to calm her, but still understood that an explanation was in order. “You know, it appears, from what these young students told me, that someone is back. Someone we thought dead.”

“And? Who is it?”

Dumbledore conjured a chair behind the Headmistress, before answering. “Harry Potter.”

The chair had been a good idea. A minute later, McGonagall recovered enough to stutter “But... how... why...”

The old man went to answer when another knock could be heard from the door. ‘Damn’ he thought, ‘I would rather tell the story only once, even if I don’t know everything yet.’

Severus Snape entered the room, at roughly the same time as Megan Prunner awoke. While the young girl cried softly, remembering what had happened before her passing out, the Potion Master quietly asked the other teachers what had happened. Albus began to answer, before being interrupted by Ron who, after going to

the door to lock it, went back toward them. He then concentrated, and the Room gave the remaining teacher a chair of his own. Everyone sat, looking at him questioningly. Snape had cast a glance at Hermione, who had nodded back, signifying that Ron was in charge of the talking.

And in charge he was. He told them about Harry's return, and the conclusion that Harry was of Gryffindor's blood. When he sat, everybody was quite thoughtful. Linking his speech to her question upon arriving in the room, the Headmistress looked at him, her eyes wide, before reflecting for a while, and turning toward Dumbledore.

"How comes we failed to contact him?"

Luna answered just before Hermione.

"Full amnesia."

Everyone looked at the Ravenclaw in wonder.

"What?" She smiled. "I'm no Hermione, but I'm still a Ravenclaw."

Hermione snorted at the jab, before smiling too. She then started to explain for the ones who hadn't understood yet. "If he was amnesic to the point of forgetting his own identity, he couldn't be reached by the owls."

Ron stood to address everyone again. "Harry asked us to keep his return quiet. I'm in no position to force anybody to obey, but I feel it was important enough to be notified. It's Harry's trust we are speaking about, here." Although he talked to everybody, he was looking Dumbledore in the eyes.

They all nodded, and greeted themselves a good day, before separating.

Albus Dumbledore was one of the last ones in the room. The other one was Severus Snape, whose sleeve he had grasped when

everyone had left, to tell him to stay. When everybody was gone, he looked at the Potion Master.

“Ronald left something out. We discovered that young Megan Prunner is indeed Harry’s sister.”

Snape looked at his colleague, quite shocked. “How is it possible?”

Dumbledore sighed, before answering. “I don’t know. I hoped that, with your history,” both men winced at the term which they both knew referred to Snape’s Death Eater days “you’d have some insights. You were there during the assault against the Potter’s House, I recall.”

“Yes... to my eternal shame. You won’t tell this to anyone, though, as promised? Especially that little group...”

“The promise still holds.”

“Good.” The Potion Master made himself comfortable before telling the story again. “We had extracted the location from Pettigrew, and Voldemort went there, followed by his inner circle. At that time, we were six: Lucius, Bellatrix, Rodolphus, Avery, O’Donnell, and me. We weren’t to intervene, though, as the dark lord wanted to be sure of his job.”

He made a pause, while Dumbledore nodded, before continuing, his eyes closed in reminiscence. “We heard the shouts of the battle with Potter, and the cries of Evans. After that, we heard Voldemort shriek like never before, and an explosion shook the house. We didn’t know what to do and didn’t dare entering the house. I recall that Lucius and Bellatrix wanted to enter, but Rodolphus and Avery told them out of it. O’Donnell told us he was going to check if the master had apparated to our headquarters and he Apparated away. An hour afterwards, Sirius Black arrived on his flying motorcycle, and we left, not having had any order to deal with further opposition. I remember guessing that it was a social call initially, as he had a cake which he dropped before entering the house. A day afterwards, the news of Voldemort’s disappearance went to the press. We never saw...”

He frowned, his eyes still closed, before opening them wide. "Albus! You should ask the mutt about this, as he was the first to enter the house... but to my recollection, O'Donnell disappeared that night too." Ginny went to the Owlery. Taking some paper and a quill from her bag, she quickly wrote a message, folded it, and fetched her favourite owl.

"Hedwig! Hedwig!"

The snowy owl recognized the voice, and left her perch to greet the distraught teenager. Her hooting made Ginny smile a little, before tying the message to the owl's leg. She then looked at her in the eye, and muttered "Harry's back, girl. Time to go back home, wherever that is, now."

The owl looked at her with something akin to wonder in her round eyes. She then hopped on the spot, hooting happily, before taking the air towards her target.

In a secluded set of rooms...

Waking up in his bed, Harry cursed his ring once again. How could he leave like that each time things were interesting? True, it has saved him, once, but it had also retarded a true meeting with Ginny by a few months. Still, he had needed Luna's help to find his lost memory, and he didn't know how a get-together with Ginny would have been without it. Alone in his rooms, he smirked, and blushed, upon imagining a hug followed by a question like 'who are you?'

The first thing he did, then, was to remove the unconscious condition from his ring, before preparing himself to go back. He was waited for.

Waited for?

Now that he remembered everything, something began to annoy him.

The Headmaster.

The old man had forced him to stay there. He had been the one putting him in their care first. He had been putting him back there

between his first and second year, thus putting him at a disadvantage to the point of almost being expelled. Some of his old friends had suggested that it was for him to live a normal childhood. A normal childhood!

Harry smirked. A normal childhood wasn't one where you were belittled all the time. A normal childhood didn't mean being struck repeatedly by one's guardians. A normal childhood couldn't include mental and physical abuse. He had wondered, when he had been a child, if there was a god. When he had arrived in Hogwarts and seen Dumbledore for the first time, he had imagined that the man was a god. Now, however, he was thinking quite the opposite. Which god would leave his charge unattended for a decade? Ten years! Ten years of neglect and abuse, and not a visit.

Harry had built quite an anger at that point, and, lowering his head, he remarked that his whole body was surrounded by sparks. He searched for something metallic to deliver his energy into, but didn't find anything. He suddenly remembered his weight bar, and jumped in his sport room to get a hold of it. Once done, even if he couldn't lift it entirely right away, he pushed the energy through his hands into the staff.

Once done, he felt better. He tried not to think about the Headmaster again, but his thoughts were going back to the man each time. Looking at the weight bar, he decided to tire himself. He knew his thoughts were always calmer after a good workout. He tried to lift the bar and found that it was quite heavy. For a workout, he needed something lower. He wondered briefly how the bar could be so heavy, before remembering the last workout he had in the room, which he finished with weights heavier than usual.

Uttering a lowered weight, he laid on the cushioned bench and started to press the bar, thinking. That weight thing made him reflect about his own strength. He remembered his state when the Dursleys weren't feeding him, and it was a miracle that he could lift anything. Still, he managed, because he had chores to do, and his muscles, although thin, were strong. Strangely, he was now able to lift really heavy weights. For instance, the weight he was now lifting was his regular 10 stones, while, when it was on the ground, he remembered

he had set it to around 25 stones. Reflecting about it, he noticed that he had always felt better, healthier, and stronger after each of his long-term stays in hospital wards. Why? He didn't know. It was just a fact.

After a few lifts, he decided to try to train his sword wielding, and thought of a sword. Despite his few periods in fencing, he had wielded only one real sword in his life, and that was when fighting the Basilisk. When the staff took the shape of that particular sword, Harry took some time to examine it. That's when he discovered something. Something was written on the blade, in a little flowing script. He knew it was only a copy, and wondered how he could have given it a more defined shape than before. That question was short-lived as he remembered having recovered his memory now. He read the name and, surprised, dropped the sword which clanked on the stone floor.

He lifted it again, and read the script again. This time, he didn't drop it, but his arms went slack and he had to sit on the bench. On the blade was written the name of its rightful owner. His ancestor. Godric Gryffindor. Remembering the elapsed year as well as his book, he made the connection with Jason's family.

Jason! His muggle friends!

He had to return home, or else Joan and Michael would worry. But at the same time, now that he had recovered his own mind, he couldn't very well leave the magical world. Dumbledore could wait, of course, as he had so much wanted to have a home and a family.

A family!

His mind froze while his thoughts took two diverging directions. Shaking, he forced them on one track again, remembering what had happened before his last arrival in his hideaway. The most important track. His family. His sister.

Looking around, he prepared himself and his ring to go back to Hogwarts, when he suddenly remembered a detail. A small detail, from his short stay in his vault. The ring's owner.

The Technomancy teacher.

The writer of the books and diary.

The builder of his hideaway.

Ginevra Shaun, his grandmother.

How comes his goddamned Headmaster didn't inform him of his whole family? In Harry's first year, the man had noticed that it was his greatest desire to have one, so he could at least have given him some names to hold on to.

Furious against the old man, he directed his elemental energy into the blade again, before slashing around wildly. He suddenly hit the bench inadvertently, and dropped the blade in shock at what happened then. Taking the blade again, he tapped it lightly against the bench without a reaction. Understanding dawned on his face as he remembered what he had done previously. He closed his eyes, concentrating on Ginny, and felt the energy flowing. After putting a bit of it in the blade, he struck the bench again.

And the same thing happened: a sharp, although small, clasp of thunder erupted from the junction, and the bench got another charred mark. Harry smiled, remembering his episode with Dementors. That would be useful!

He was sure that Dumbledore would want to question him, and he had to tell the tale of what had happened in the year to his friends. He was sure that it would take the whole week to unfold, and he deemed that popping at Joan's place was the simplest thing to do. He only had to explain quickly that he recovered his memory, before coming back to Ginny. Definitely, if possible. He also had to visit his vault and equip himself in the usual wizard's paraphernalia.

He prepared himself to leave again, this time for muggle London, by turning back into his real appearance and checking about his ring again. When doing so, he had many thoughts of regret about his muggle friends not able to stay with him at Hogwarts.

To be continued in next chapter: Disturbing Revelations...

Merlin! There are times like these,  
Where my muse gets a disease.  
Weaving threads is quite easy,  
Merging them can be messy.

## Chapter 28 – Disturbing Revelations

“Good morning and thank you to be here. I hereby declare open the 538th session of the Order of the Phoenix.”

These words uttered, Albus Dumbledore sat down. The others looked around them uneasily. Most of them still had bandages due to the attack on Hogwarts, and some were missing altogether, either stranded in the Hospital wing, or dead.

“The first order of business is the attack aftermath. If everybody agrees, I propose to run all the funerals next week-end. We will also host the ceremony at Hogwarts and build a memorial there.”

A young witch, visibly still shaken from her injuries, raised her hand. “How many... how many did we...”

Seeing her state, the aged professor understood the question and nodded. “We have suffered many casualties, although less than it would have been if we hadn’t been helped.” People began to discuss between them at this, and he raised his hand to get their attention before continuing. “From the defending force, we lost twelve students, three professors, and nine other Order members. They were mostly victims of the curses from the Death Eaters, as it appears that, when a Dementor falls, he releases the souls of those it Kissed recently.”

When he saw that people were becoming restless, wanting to ask question, he raised his hand again, and continued his macabre count. “We also have twenty students, two professors, and five members wounded. Now, there is also the matter of the Great Hall. We gathered the weakest students there, but apparently, there were junior Death Eaters in their midst.” Seeming to ignore the gasp of outrage of his audience, while he was cringing internally, he continued. “Eight students launched a bodily attack on their comrades, and I’m sorry to report ten fallen students and nineteen wounded. We also lost Elphias, and Sybil got critically wounded. The aggressors have been dealt with, though, and the persons behind all this are being punished.”

That last sentence calmed the meeting somewhat, before people remembered their question from earlier. "What happened with the Dementors? Why did they stop attacking? And what was that lion? Who was it?" The last question was asked by the tiny professor Flitwick, who had seen, like most of the audience, the boy transforming into the winged lion in the great hall.

Dumbledore sighed. That wasn't going to be easy, and he would have to lie a little. But he could manage. He had lied before, after all. "For those who didn't see, we got helped by a winged lion, which dispatched many Dementors before launching on the Death Eaters. He disappeared afterwards, but on the evening, a boy entered the great hall, and transformed into the animal in front of us. His identity, as well as the exact circumstances of his appearance and transformation, is not known. The girl who was with him in the great hall is unknown as well.

"Now, concerning the Dementors... the party that went to Azkaban succeeded in bringing back the artefact we needed to control the Dementors. After a short time trying, we finally got full control over them. They are now in the lowest levels of Hogwarts, not to move away except to defend the castle. Of course, we have reinforced these orders by preventing anyone to circumvent them. I'm sure Voldemort is quite distraught about that at the moment."

While the debriefing went on and on, Albus Dumbledore couldn't stop thinking about Harry's return and its impact on Hogwarts, Voldemort, and a certain Prophecy. It was only after an hour into the meeting that he took notice of Moody's non-attendance. He was ready to ask someone about the aged Auror absence when the fireplace roared to life, and a tall person entered the room. The intruder was clad in a black cloak with the hood up so that the face was hidden. Even the voice wasn't recognizable, although everyone present recognized the work attire of an Unspeakable.

These persons were in the deepest secrecy inside the Ministry. No one really knew who they were, but everyone knew that their job was to guard the most important secrets and most powerful items of the wizarding world. The Unspeakable's hood oriented toward Dumbledore, and a disguised voice spoke. "Auror Alastor Moody

gave us several items of great importance and asked us a question. The answer might interest Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix. As such, Albus Dumbledore is required to appear in the Department of Mysteries lobby.”

The cloaked figure then disappeared, and everyone began to express their wonder and worry at the news. Dumbledore stood up, and addressed the group. “I should be back in an hour. We will reconvene then. In the meantime, and if I’m late, the Headmistress will be in charge.”

He then straightened himself, and Apparated in the Ministry main lobby, before navigating his way in the convoluted building toward the Department of Mysteries.

Alastor Moody was waiting there, with an Unspeakable who resembled the one that fetched Dumbledore, although you couldn’t really say, as the outfit made all of them look similar. The old Auror was looking disgruntled to be waiting, but, once Dumbledore entered the room, a door appeared in one of the walls, and they were ushered inside by the cloaked figure.

The room was quite small, and the floor, walls, and ceiling, were all decorated with intricate wooden shapes, some of which animated. The only furniture items were three high-backed chairs beside a large and sturdy table. On the table were three objects: Moody’s trunk, a book, and the pensieve-like basin that they had taken from Azkaban.

The Unspeakable sat, visibly waiting for them to sit as well. Albus Dumbledore, despite being one of the most powerful wizards in the world, couldn’t perceive the hidden person’s identity or thoughts. Alastor Moody, despite having a magical eye, couldn’t look through the hood either. However, both knew that the Unspeakables’ power was backed by the Ministry, through unknown means. They sat silently.

The asexual voice resounded in the small room, and the words themselves were heralding doom for the wizarding world. The two guests were so shocked that they couldn’t utter a word during the whole speech.

“The last prisoner alive in the lowest level of Azkaban wasn't displayed in the Register you browsed, Auror Moody, because the Register itself was created 852 years ago, and that man was imprisoned before that. 99 years before, to be exact. That prisoner escaped, thanks to Auror Tonks' lapse of attention. However, due to his identity, it should have been obvious that it could have happened one day or the other.”

The Unspeakable crossed his black-gloved hands on his lap and continued. “Eighty-three years ago, the Aurors managing the prison found that this man had a very large cell, twice as large as the others, and, not knowing why, they conjured a wall in the middle of the cell while the prisoner was sleeping. You now know, Auror Moody, that the trapdoor you found was in fact part of that prisoner's cell, and the study you emptied, his own.”

Standing up, the cloaked figure paced for a time, before continuing his tale. “We suspected, but it's now proven thanks to one of his books,” he pointed to the book opened on the table, “that this wizard had created several of the darkest spells we know of, three of which being notorious under the Unforgivables epithet.” He ignored the gasps of the two old wizards, and sat down again. “However, such a breakthrough doesn't come with a price, and more questions arose.” he bent to read from the book, “I made this spell and these creatures to achieve one goal: remove the target's soul and transfer it to the receptacle I made for this, so long ago.” He was pointing at the dark basin. “These souls will help me outlive my old enemy Godefroy Frederic, so that I'll wipe all of these mudbloods as soon as I get out of his ill-thought imprisonment.”

He looked up. “Of course, you both know about a Godefroy Frederic who lived more than 950 years ago?” Seeing their perplexed look, the hooded figure sighed. “Of course. If I tell you that that Godefroy Frederic preferred to be called Godric?”

The two guests looked at him, shell-shocked at all these revelations, wide-eyed, mouth open, and totally mute.

Broderick Bode chuckled internally. If his Unspeakable job had allowed it, he would have taken pictures of these two wizards, who were rumoured impossible to baffle and who were now completely flabbergasted. For a fleeting moment, he reflected about the line drawn by the High Council between what was to reveal and what was to hide. Bode had voted for revealing the truth, at least telling the spell's name to these two. But the others had rejected the idea, arguing that it would change everyone's view of the magical world, and that the man's identity was enough for now. True to their traditions, the one losing the vote had to act on it.

Returning his mind to the present, he prepared himself to ask the last question, ready to give the coup de grâce. Looking at them through the magical construct that made his face invisible and his voice unrecognisable, he uttered it. "Now that you know that this escaped prisoner was Gryffindor's nemesis, and that he hated muggleborns, do you really need to be told his name?"  
In a large castle...

The room was large. No, scratch that. The room was huge. And its shape proved that its construction had been supervised by a great architect, no other than Leonardo da Vinci. The walls were decorated by paintings easily recognizable as being from Titien, Michelangelo, and Boticelli. Several magnificent statues lined the wall. In the middle of it, a grand piano was opened, and the music from it permeated the whole room. An old man was playing, alone, in the huge room, and the tune wasn't one that was written anywhere, although it was as beautiful as the room.

One of the large doors clashed open, and a person clad in black leather entered, panting. The old man looked at him, and stopped playing immediately, rising to meet the other. "In the name of everything that doesn't exist yet, what art thou doing ere?"

The other raised his head, having visible difficulties to breathe. "We... we have to meet... urgent... game." he said, before disappearing.

The old man thought for a second, and disappeared too.

He met the other one in what they had called the Chess Room, a long time ago. That room was located right between their domains, so that none of them could have any influence on the play. The second reason for its location is because each domain had a residual effect on its inhabitants, and the two masters had great difficulties moving in the other's domain. That's why Thirteen's panting appearance in his 18th music room had disturbed him greatly.

Said androgyne was looking better now, having conjured an armchair and resting. Once he could speak normally again, he fixed the old man with a piercing gaze.

"We have a problem."

The old man waited for the other to tell exactly what the problem was. When he didn't, he asked "Well?"

"A big one. If the Superintendent gets wind of it, we might even get replaced."

"We?"

"Yes. We. Us. I didn't check my arrivals, and you didn't keep your creations in check. Now, one of them has found a way to cheat us of several thousands souls. It could even be counted in millions, for all I know."

"But... but... how?"

"Remember the leeway you gave to your pieces as a reward for gaining the chess game we played a thousand years ago?"

"Hmmm... yes? What about it?"

"One of them is still alive!"

If the androgyne could have thought that possible, he would have taken a picture of the old man's surprised face. As the Creator, the old man was normally impervious to surprises. But now, he was

looking at the other one with wide eyes, before stuttering “But... how... when... why...?”

“Articulate, aren’t we now?” the androgyne smirked, before taking a serious expression again. “He has lived longer than anyone, even the little alchemist who you rewarded for his creations. What was his name, again? Flannel?”

“Flamel.”

“Anyway... back to our wayward mortal. I don’t know how, but I guess that he had found a way to use the souls, and... what?”

The old man looked guiltily at him. “I might have played a role there. He proposed to create a spell to differentiate the souls so that we wouldn’t argue anymore to separate them between our realms. That was ambitious, and the man was old already, very ill, and imprisoned, so I thought ‘why not?’ and I gave him... I gave him the structure of the soul.”

The other one looked flabbergasted, before retorting angrily. “You gave a mortal the structure of the soul? You are really mad!”

“I thought he was going to die soon afterwards!”

“He was not! He proposed the same thing to me, though through a creature instead of a spell, and he only asking to live some years to achieve his project.”

“Thou... thou didst agree?”

“What do you think? At that time, I was already fed up about our arguing over every little soul.”

“That means that... he’s immortal, now?”

The androgyne smirked. “Apparently not.”

“How so?”

“Through a fluke of fate, this man had been separated from the receptacle where he holds the missing souls, eighty-or-so years ago. Speaking of which, I saw the receptacle and I don’t envy these souls. The basin is plain, without any interest. At least, in my domains, the souls have things to do. I guess that some of them have spent a thousand year of boredom now.”

“Should we pause our game to treat that?”

“You know very well that we can’t. The pieces are moving by themselves because of your insistence to give them free will... again!”

“Well... at least the man does not belong to it.”

Silence met this last sentence.

“Tell me he is not in the game.”

Still silence.

“I cannot believe it! Since when?”

“What do you think? He appeared next to my King and helped its promotion.”

“Yes, I saw that. Very impressive...”

“Back to the topic, if you will? I initially thought it was a zealous follower, but I looked him up, and fetched you a few minutes ago.”

An uneasy silence fell on the room, only troubled by the sound of chess pieces moving around. Unnoticed by the two entities in the room, a black bishop was turned right toward them from the chess board, its stylised head smirking.  
Northern London, that afternoon...

Harry Potter, after having assumed his usual appearance, used his ring to portkey back in his bedroom at the Freyr's. He didn't know the exact time but the shadows cast by the spring sun told him it was mid-afternoon. Because it was a school day, he thought that nobody was home, and wanted to sit on his bed to ponder about what to tell his friends. His first bodily need, though, was to use the toilet, and he opened his bedroom door.

And jumped back in fright.

He was attacked!

By... furniture?

In front of him, crashing on the floor, went the folding ironing table and the large wooden planks he had prepared a few days ago for Joan. He cursed himself. Of course, him being absent, they could put things against his door as much as they want. He listened to hear if anyone was home, but heard nothing. Thinking about it, he could only smack his forehead mentally, as anyone smart enough would be silent after his crash.

Peering around his door, and into the stairs, he froze. There, looking straight at him with surprised faces, were his four friends.

A pregnant pause ensued.

Jason was the first to react. "Shall we discuss about all this, Gabriel?"

After a second or two pondering the situation and the offer, Harry shook himself and then nodded. He couldn't close his door, so he just stepped over the obstacle and went downstairs. As he approached his friends, only silence met him. They went to the living room, and sat. Only then did he notice that Tamara was looking at him nervously, as if trying to tell him something.

Jason was the first to break the silence, again. "Well... Gabriel, Tamara told us quite everything."

Harry looked at her in wonder, but Tamara spoke first. "I had to tell them about your hideaway." she blurted, "The school... our school is closed because they didn't find the corpses after our falling from the roof. Speaking of which, they think it was a suicide. I also told them about you travelling with me to your school then bringing me back home." Unnoticed by the others, she was looking at him with a pleading look while saying the last sentence.

Harry understood that she wanted him not to question that last part in front of them, but he didn't know what had happened to her exactly, so he reflected that he would have to question her later.

Jason spoke again. "Gabriel... after everything we noticed you doing... will you confirm being a... wizard?"

A silence.

And, after a deep sigh, Harry answered. "Well... yes."

The shouted questions that came next prevented him to explain more. However, hearing a distinctive and repetitive knock at the window, he tuned them out immediately. Standing brusquely, he jumped over the small table to reach the window behind which a flurry of feathers could be seen. Opening the window, he was bowled over by a large and white bird hooting wildly. The display was so bizarre that the other teens could only gape at it, while Harry rose from the floor.

The young wizard was holding a large bird, crying in relief. His friends could only make some words out of his jumbled speech. "Hedwig! I'm sorry! I thought I lost you too..."

Patting his owl, Harry quickly noticed that a message was attached to her leg. He didn't have the time to take it, because another owl, this time a brown one, barged through the open window, hitting him in the head with its package. He barely caught it, before the brown owl left through the window again. Harry sighed, and went to close the window.

He then took Hedwig's message, before going back to his seat, his rediscovered owl perched on his shoulder, nibbling gently on his ear,

to the mute stupefaction of his friends. He smiled, and told them "Sorry, guys. Mail."

He barely noticed their jaws hanging even lower. None of them had ever seen owls carrying mail, and, associated with him being a wizard, it was beginning to become incomprehensible. Harry opened the package delivered by the brown owl. He glanced at the first of several sheets of paper, and smiled, uttering only one word before closing the package. "Luna." He would have time afterwards to explore the current stories in the magical world.

After a quick glance at his friends, he smirked at their dumbfounded state, and opened the other letter. The message was short.

Harry,

I took care of Hedwig while you were "away".

I do hope to see you again soon.

Love from,

Ginny

Harry brought his hand to his eye, and wiped away the tear that was there. It has been a long time since his other eye couldn't shed a tear anymore, and even if it could, his skin had been burnt there, and would have been unable to feel it.

He then looked at his friends, and they were still looking at him in wonder.

"Hmmm... hi?"

Still nothing.

"Well... I guess that a little presentation is in order." He braced himself, knowing that it was going to be difficult. Thinking about it, he stopped himself just when he was to tell them his real name. They

were muggles, and if a Death Eater happened to hear them speaking about him, they would be in great danger. Besides, if what Hermione had told last year was true, he could still be reached with owls using Gabriel's name as he could still think about himself as such. After all, he had spent a whole year under that name.

"Ah, well. Sorry. I just remembered something important. As you know, I have had problems with my memory."

They all nodded faintly. At least, he thought, they were following.

"Last night, I met someone who helped me recover it."

Seeing their gazes, he felt obligated to elaborate.

"That person knew me, and gave me my name back, and that helped me tremendously." He looked briefly at Tamara next. "She also taught me something... about what had happened in the school."

Her eyes showed that she understood, but she didn't dare to move a finger, to avoid the others' attention. Sensing it, Harry looked at his other friends in turn.

Jason shook himself, and tentatively asked "Well... it's awkward... who are you, then?"

He looked at them seriously. "I can't tell you. Where I come from, there are some dangerous persons who seek me out. It's better for you to still call me Gabriel."

He then looked at Jason and continued. "To ease a bit of curiosity you might have about me, Jason... yes, I'm related to that old cousin of yours. And yes, he was a wizard, too. A mightily powerful one on top of that. But, for the same reason as before, I'd prefer that you never mention his name in public."

Kevin was recovering his wits, too, and was now bouncing up and down on his seat. "Can you demonstrate?"

“What?”

“Can you show us what you can do?”

He frowned, and shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I’d rather not do anything foolish. Besides, I don’t have my wand.”

“Your... wand?”

“Yes. Thinking about what had happened in Halloween, I guess I unconsciously thought that I had one, but I could only provoke an accident. So there, no demonstration...” seeing the crestfallen expression on his friend’s face, he mischievously added “yet. However, now that I know who I am, I will have to continue my education in my old school.”

They all fell silent, and Joan looked at Harry with her eyes wide open and shining. She tried to speak, but failed, and, sobbing, she fled to the kitchen. Jason started to stand up, obviously to follow her, before remembering Harry’s presence and sitting back down. Noticing that, and remembering Jason’s reaction when he had arrived in school a year ago, Harry stood, and, putting a hand on his arm, spoke in his ear so that the two others couldn’t hear. “She doesn’t belong to me. We’ll talk about it later.”

Standing up, he winked to the dumbfounded expression Jason was displaying, and he went to the kitchen. There, he easily noticed Joan who was sitting on a chair facing the window, her arms circling her knees.

“Joan?”

No answer.

“J?”

She mumbled something.

“What?”

In a very small voice, she asked "You are going to leave m... us?"

He understood, and that wasn't an easy chat to have. "I'm sorry, J. I have to. I'll be there often, though."

She turned toward him and looked at him through watery eyes. "Do you... did you lo... do you like me?"

He could only blink back his own tears, and went next to her, before hugging her. After a few seconds, he answered. "I like you very much, Joan. You deserve the whole truth." He sighed, and stepped back so that he could look her in the eye, even if he was nervous. "There was a girl I... liked... before losing my memory. When I saw you for the first time, I thought it was you, because you look like her. Now that my mind is whole, I want to come back to her." He held her close again, sensing new tears coming up. "I'm sorry. You'll always be one of my best friends. One of my only friends, in fact."

They spent a long time together, before being interrupted by the sound of someone entering the house. Michael was home. Their three other friends went home, after they all promised to meet early at Jason's place the next day, which was a Saturday.

Midnight, in a dark cottage on the outskirts of Manchester...

Voldemort was pacing in front of his followers. He was smiling. Next to his throne, on an equally magnificent armchair, his ally looked bored.

"Death Eaters!" he shouted suddenly.

That had the effect of surprising his followers. They had always been wary of him, and today was no exception.

"Dear followers..." he continued.

That got their attention. They looked around, not quite understanding their Dark Lord's new way of speaking. Never before had he addressed them likewise.

"I'm alive!" he yelled, before launching this high-pitched laugh that unnerved everyone. Only a light tapping stopped him. Voldemort turned around, ready to curse the impudent interrupting his mirth. Seeing his ally smirking at him, he remembered the plan, and turned again, addressing his followers again.

"We are to conquer again! When the Dementors failed, we will succeed! We will crush them, beginning by their weakest point. We will destroy their morale, we will..."

A small cough, only heard by him, stopped his rant. He didn't turn around now, imagining the exact smirk that awaited him behind him. That ally was really unnerving, he thought. He addressed his followers again, this time trying to stick to the plan.

"Each of you has been assigned a commander, and you will follow them, obeying their orders, and generally wreaking havoc wherever you go. Bellatrix, you and your group will attack Hogsmeade. Lambert, you go to Ottery St Catchpole. Jugson, you go to the Ramsgate Pier. I will take Diagon Alley. Don't forget: these are intimidation missions against wizarding settlements, so I want you to leave as soon as any opposition arises. Get around your commander, get ready, and apparate together in fifteen minutes, I want them completely disorganized."

Chaos ensued, followers moving around to get near their commanders, who had to remove their masks to be recognized. Voldemort's ally took his head in his hands, sighing at the lack of military efficiency in that Dark Lord. Voldemort himself felt strange, as if he just forgot something. He shook his head, though, as he had to clear the mess of followers moving around, and to lead an attack afterwards.

Earlier that evening, in northern London...

The meal was subdued. Michael had been pleased to see Harry, and glad that he had recovered his memory. He was sad, though, that Harry, which he still called Gabriel, had to leave soon. Harry hadn't told him about being a wizard, and the man felt that there were things unsaid. Joan was also sad about his leave. All in all, they didn't talk much during the meal.

A bit afterwards, Joan and Harry went upstairs in their respective bedrooms. Harry had just the time to send a short answer to Ginny, telling her that he was going back shortly, when Joan entered his room, crying again. They then discussed about him, her, and Michael.

"You have to tell him! I don't have the right to tell him instead of you, but I can't lie to him either. Please?"

He sighed. "Okay, okay. But only the minimum."

"Just tell him what you are and why you have to leave soon."

"Will you be there?"

"Yes."

They went downstairs, where Michael was reading a book. He prepared to greet them, but, by looking at their faces, the man felt that they had something to say.

"Yes?"

Harry coughed, before addressing him. "Michael, there have been some... unusual events going on around the fair, you remember?"

The man frowned, half trying to remember, and half wondering where that discussion will lead.

Harry continued. "Well, as Joan and our friends discovered it already, I have a little secret I have to share with you before leaving."

The man held his hand in front of him. "You do as you wish, Gabriel. If you don't want to tell, it's your right. If you do, though, know that your secret will be safe with me."

Harry smiled. "I guessed so. I will tell you, for you to be able to understand things, as well as Joan and our friends when they will speak about me." He drew a deep breath. "First of all, do you believe in magic?"

After discussing with them for the best part of an hour, and proving things by disappearing to his hideaway once, Harry felt quite tired. After all, he had been awake for almost 24 hours now. Contrarily to what he had initially thought, he promised to stay for school until the end of term, keeping in touch with his friends. After making that promise, he added that he had a revenge to plan, then, as the jocks hadn't been punished for their crime yet.

He took his leave of them, and, yawning widely, went to bed. He was asleep before his head even hit the pillow. His sleep, however, was to be cut short, as a vivid dream took place. Well, it wasn't a dream as one could think. It wasn't a nightmare either, as there weren't any distressing feelings involved, although his head hurt. It was more like a vision, a vision where a madman with a scaly skin made plans to attack wizarding homes. Understanding the danger and the identity of the scaly madman, he woke with a start. Remembering the scale of power in the wizarding world, he spoke to his ring.

"Hogliewarts."

Once there, he transformed into a winged lion, and quickly ran to what he thought was the Headmaster's office, scaring Filch and Mrs. Norris on his way. Once there, he found himself looking at a gargoyle statue quite stupidly. He didn't have the password! Annoyed about it, he ran to where he could find his other well-known figure of authority: the office of Professor McGonagall. Once there, he transformed back, and knocked repeatedly on the door, panting. After a minute, a tired male voice told him to enter, and the lock clicked open, while he heard footsteps in the corridor behind him. He opened the door quickly, and was quite surprised to see Albus Dumbledore in a mauve nightshirt decorated with flying brooms. Even the nightcap had the

same moving pattern. He didn't have time for wonderment, though, as his news was of the utmost urgency.

"Professor Dumbledore, I-"

"My, my, my, is it you, Harry?"

"I had a vision, and-"

The door opened again, and the Headmistress entered, holding the intrusion warning device. She saw the boy and her eyes opened wide, before a barrage of question was thrown his way. It was surreal, as he had urgent news, and they didn't even listen to him. In anger, he released a short wave of lightning, shouting "QUIET!"

In the stunned silence that ensued, he talked to them both, in a rapid speech, telling them a summary of his vision, Voldemort and his new body, the targets and the delays. Looking at his watch, he breathed "They will apparate there in five minutes."

Understanding the urgency as well, Dumbledore grasped his wand and a strange medallion in a shape of a phoenix. Thinking about it, he looked at McGonagall for a second, before throwing the medallion to her. A silent conversation took place for a second and then Dumbledore left through the fireplace, heading towards the Auror Headquarters. Despite the urgent news, his arrival there would be talked about for a long time.

After Dumbledore left, McGonagall put the medallion on, and pressed it in a certain way. It began to glow, and she then seemed to wait for something, while looking at Harry. They looked at each other uneasily, before he addressed her.

"I... I have to go, Professor."

"Where, Harry?"

"I can't say."

She frowned. Normally, her students were always quite obedient, and seldom refused to answer such a direct question.

“You know you can’t wander around without protection, Harry.”

He looked at her in incredulity. How could she say that? Painful memories came up, before he squashed them away. Last summer, he had been sent to a wretched house for his protection. And from the moment he had woken up on that dump afterwards, he had lived without protection, and everything had been fine. If the concept of protection in the wizarding world entailed being beaten and abused, it sure wasn’t a world he wanted to live in. And he wouldn’t bring news such as tonight.

He expressed his thoughts to her, noticing with satisfaction that her face paled considerably in the process. When she was fumbling for a chair to sit, he talked to her again, this time more calmly.

“You can’t restrain me, and that’s why I’ll come back later. But if you, or anyone of authority, try to restrain me, I’ll leave for good. I’d be sad to miss my magical education, but I can live without.” He smirked. “After all, I lived ten years being belittled, and now that I spent a full year of freedom in the muggle world, I could be tempted to consider it my safe haven.”

It hadn’t been his intent to leave that way, but, thinking about it while lying on his hideaway bed, it was perfect. On these thoughts, he fell asleep quite swiftly. He wasn’t to sleep peacefully, though, as he was plagued by nightmares. They started with a magical battle between Death Eaters and Aurors in Diagon Alley, quickly joined by another team of wizards in which he recognized a few members of the Hogwarts staff. Avoiding the skirmish, the Death Eater fled, and the nightmare ended in several rounds of Voldemort venting his anger at his unsuccessful followers.

When Harry woke up afterwards, he reflected on these nightmares. Contrarily to the other one where he had been warned of the attack, these were very slow, and, although it made them longer, the pain in his head was lowered as well. Taking in his surroundings again, he

concluded that it must have been an effect of the skewed time frame of his hideaway. He smiled. If the now receding nightmares were accurate, Voldemort's troops hadn't been able to inflict any corporeal damage to anyone, thanks to his warning.

He rose, stretched, and looked at his watch, trying to estimate the time outside. Even if he was more and more able to do the computation, it was always time-consuming, and he imagined that a special clock could be installed in the rooms to always give the outside time. Thinking about this, he also remembered the kind of job his grandmother did, and it opened new thought avenues, some of them including the action of reading each and every book currently in his bookcase, to be able to build the clock by himself.

As he was looking towards his bookcase, he remembered that there was a box on top of it, and fetched it. He put his hand on the lid again, and took it back when the usual spark appeared.

"That's stupid," he said aloud, "it's my element, it can't harm me."

He tentatively put his hand on the lock, eliciting a harmless continuous lightning between his hand and the locking mechanism. Seeing that he wasn't affected by it, he tried to open the lock, but to no avail. He could try to melt the lock using his element, but he preferred not to damage his grandmother's property, as there could be a key of some sort in his vault.

His vault!

He would have to go to Gringotts tomorrow, and check if he could enter it without his key.

He took a long hot shower, clearing his thoughts in the process. After a quick breakfast thanks to his magical plate, he decided to get information about the current state of the magical world, and the first step in this was to get Luna's pack of letters and Daily Prophet issues. He checked the outside time again. 4am, good. He portkeyed to his bedroom at Joan's place, one of his pre-programmed locations, and took hold of his letters. While moving around, though, he was

suddenly startled by a rapping at the window. Opening it, he saw Hedwig, who hooted indignantly at being kept outside for so long.

He tried to calm her, unsuccessfully, before remembering why he had come back. Taking Hedwig with his ring hand, and his papers in the other, he went to his Hideaway again. Needless to say, the owl was kind of frantic to live in a place without windows. A bit of bacon and water from the magical plate contributed in calming her, though, leaving Harry alone to read in the bed.

The Daily Prophet was mostly as usual, he reflected, remembering about his Parselmouth ability and the chaos that had ensued after its discovery. The wizarding newspaper was always focusing on sensational events, pushing important, but less sparkling, ones in the latest pages.

Luna had astutely marked the most interesting articles, and he browsed through the story of the change in Minister, gawking at Malfoy's participation to it, and laughing at the story of how he had been uncovered. He was also very happy to find that Ron's family was better now. Through Luna's timetables, he learned more about the changes in the Hogwarts staff. He finished by opening an envelope on which his friend had written 'to read last – emotionally charged.'

Inside was only one page, visibly ripped from a copy of the wizarding newspaper that had been issued in the late summer of the previous year. It titled 'Sirius Black innocent' on the whole page. Intrigued about it, as the name had appeared in the Hogwarts staff list, Harry read.

And cried.

And read again.

And cried again.

The story was complete, explaining the role of Peter Pettigrew and his recent disappearance from the Death Eaters ranks, disappearance explained through an interview of one of the recently

captured Death Eaters. An excerpt in the paper had drawn the family links between Sirius and the Black family, as well as the Potter family. Finding that Sirius was related to Draco Malfoy wasn't something to make him laugh, but the only family relation between Sirius and the Potters made him sob uncontrollably.

He had a godfather!

Luna had been right about the emotional charge, and he collapsed in the bed, half-crying and half-laughing, sending random sparks of his element around him, until he fell asleep once more emotionally exhausted.

Hogwarts, the following morning...

Sirius Black had been extremely reserved this year. That's how he now considered himself to have lived in the previous months. He had come to grips with his wrongful captivity, and with the drinking habit that had ensued. With the help of his friend Remus, and with some potions helpfully brewed by a reluctant Potion Master, he was now quite healed. He could show his cleanly shaved face at breakfast for the first time in months. Of course, the fight with the Dementors had awakened difficult memories, but it had also given him a drive to fight, now that he had a wand. He now had a stronger hold on himself.

When he arrived in the Great Hall, it was quite early. An exception, for him, but the approaching full moon had compelled him to sleep in the Shrieking Shack, the supposedly haunted house in Hogsmeade, with his werewolf friend Remus. He hadn't slept at all, but was still alert. Anyways, he was going to take a nap that day before going with his friend again the night afterwards.

Upon reaching the staff table, he remarked that not many professors were there. And he almost turned back outside when he saw that one of them was Severus Snape. Leaving would have meant he was weak, though, and he didn't want to appear weak in front of his nemesis. He sat down, and began to pile food in his plate, under the inquisitive look of the Potion Master. After a few minutes of eating silently, Snape stood up, and turned around the staff table to head

outside. On his way, though, he dropped a small parchment near Sirius' plate.

Suspecting a prank, even if he had calmed himself due to his decade of torment, Sirius turned the paper upside down with his cutlery.

Join us at the Headmistress office at 10, we have information about Harry.

He looked at the note in disbelief. Who were the us? Why did they have information about Harry? And why now, when he had come to grips with his life? He was tempted not to go, but reflected that the message had been given without Snivellus' usual sneer, and the meeting place was neutral territory. He finished his meal, and went to straighten the rooms he shared with Remus. He then read a few pages of a muggle book until the meeting time came.

In the room, facing the entrance, were Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape. When he closed the door, though, he also remarked that a few students were there as well. Even if he hadn't met them between classes, he knew that Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley had been friends with his godson. He had also been told that Ginny Weasley had been close to him, and that Megan Prunner looked like him. What they were doing there, though, was a complete mystery to him. He looked at Dumbledore, and, while surprised at the old man's bandage on the ear, asked about his reason for being there.

"Albus, Sni... Severus here told me that you had information about... about Harry?"

"Yes, Sirius. Please sit down and most importantly, stay calm. Severus?"

The Potion Master took a vial from his pocket, and put it in front of Sirius before standing. "In this vial is what we call the Elixir of the Clear Mind. It's a bit complicated to brew, but it has the double effect of helping the imbiber to reconstruct their memories from fragments, and also to calm the person as well. It allows them to bring forth

painful memories in detail without the distressing effect.” He then sneered, and launched, quickly “To extract the same kind of information, there is also Legilimency, although it’s harmful, dangerous, and takes time, but-”

Dumbledore interrupted his Potion Master. “Thank you, Severus. Can you tell Sirius why you think his mind has what we want?”

Sirius was a little uneasy at the whole exchange. “Wait a minute! I thought you had information about Harry?”

Dumbledore flashed his usual benign smile. “Yes, we have, but we have to confirm something before telling you everything. Please, drink up.”

Sirius uncorked the vial, and smelled it tentatively. To his surprise, contrarily to most potions, that one didn’t have a bad smell. In fact, it didn’t have a smell at all. He lifted it in a movement encompassing the whole room. “Cheers.” And drank it.

He instantly went rigid, his eyes glazed. The effect on the body was the same as the Veritaserum, blocking almost all physical reaction. The potion’s aim was different, though.

Snape took charge of the discussion, while everybody sat up, intent on listening. Megan especially, as she had been briefed on the questions beforehand. And warned about the possible answers.

“Black, you hear me?”

“Yes, Snivellus.”

Snape glared around to quiet the snickers that had erupted at the Potion Master’s nickname of old. He couldn’t do anything to prevent Sirius to use it, because the man was in his own mind. Quite literally.

“You were the first to enter the house after James and Lily Potter died-”

“I don’t know...”

“It wasn’t a question.”

“Oh.”

“Tell us what you see.”

“I arrive with my flying motorcycle. Have I ever told you about it, Snivellus? James helped me-”

“We don’t want to know about it, Black.” Snape interrupted. “Tell us about the house and its inhabitants.”

Sirius didn’t react to the interruption, and merely continued his recounting. “The door has been blasted open. I rush inside. James looks like he’s dead. I saw many Adava Kedavra victims, and he looks like one. There is a fire near the curtains, but I don’t notice it.”

“Very well, now go upstairs.”

“There is some smoke, I don’t see very far.”

“Clear the smoke. See with your mind.”

“There is a body lying on the corridor floor, near a big dent in the wall. It’s Voldemort! It looks as if he had been thrown violently from the bedroom. The smoke comes from his mouth, nose, ears, and eyes. I don’t feel well in the smoke. It’s like I’m inside someone’s mind. Someone dark.”

“Does the smoke move?”

“It moves in circles around the body, trying to enter it again, but it can’t. After a while, it leaves the house through a broken window.”

“Go in the bedroom, now.”

Despite the potion, Sirius' expression became distressed. "Oh my god! That's horrible! There is blood on the floor. Lily is there, and it looks like she had been... gutted. A knife rests on the floor, bloodied too."

"What happens next?"

"Nothing for a while. The silence is unnerving. I think that I have to Apparate away from the fire that had now reached the stairs, when I hear a baby crying. I move toward the sound, and I notice that it comes from the hamper. Either Lily hid little Harry in there, or he had been thrown in it after she died. Either way, he has a strange scar on his forehead, in a shape of a lightning bolt. And it's bleeding, poor Harry."

"What do you do?"

"I take Harry, and I cry. I will take him to Dumbledore. He will know how to protect him. I leave."

"Wait! Come back to Lily."

"I don't want to. There's blood everywhere."

"I know. How much time had elapsed since you last saw her?"

"I was seeing James regularly, but I remember, now, that she hadn't been to our meetings for some time before she... died. I guess it was six or seven months. I also remember that, in the last meeting I saw her, she was bitching James quite a lot. I made a few jokes about it to Peter and Remus."

Severus Snape was quite aghast at the implication of it, as were the other listeners. Shaking himself, the Potion Master talked again.

"Thank you, Sirius. You can come back, now. You gradually leave the memory, which will return to its previous state in your mind. We are in the Headmistress office. Wake up... Wake up!"

Sirius eyes closed, then snapped open.

“What happened?”

“You told us about the fact that Lily Potter might have been pregnant when she had been attacked, and that the baby had been stolen. I have an idea about who did that to her, but I have to check many things to confirm it.”

Dumbledore rose. “Thank you, Severus, Sirius.” He then turned towards Megan. “In the meantime, you can perhaps ask your parents about it? I mean, your adoptive parents, obviously.”

Sirius was quite stunned at the news, but, looking at her with his memory of James and Lily, he could only agree that she could have been their daughter. Like the photos he had seen of Harry, she had her mother’s vibrant green eyes and her father’s messy hair. He shook himself awake, and asked the question for which he had come here initially.

“So... what about Harry? Did you unearth his body to find that he wasn’t James and Lily’s son, like in badly written muggle stories?”

Everyone looked at him apologetically, and the ex-convict became nervous.

“Sirius...” began Dumbledore, capturing the man’s attention before delivering the blow. “Harry’s alive.”

Sirius had always prized himself to his ability to never be surprised. However, that little sentence pushed his mind so far that he recoiled, eyes and mouth wide open. And he fainted.

Looking at the collapsed form of his colleague, Snape muttered “That sure is a moment to remember.”

To be continued in next chapter: Girl Friends and Girlfriends...

They speak about aftermath,

And Harry's friends do the math.  
Will they see him again soon,  
Or shall he stay at his school?

## Chapter 29 – Girl Friends and Girlfriends

Early in the morning, outside time, Harry Potter came back to Hogwarts through the usual empty office. Thinking about it, he decided to add a few places for his ring, as the office was surely watched. As it was still night time, he transformed into his kitten form, and escaped the room. True to his insight, he saw the tired frame of professor McGonagall heading towards the office. He wanted to see Ginny before meeting his muggle friends or anyone else, and he headed towards the Gryffindor Tower. Once there, he mentally kicked himself again, as he didn't have the password.

Mewling in frustration, he scratched the portrait of the sleeping Fat Lady. The effect was almost immediate, as she woke immediately before shrieking at the damage.

“What did you do, you stupid, stupid animal!” Agitated, she paced around in her frame, before speaking again. “You want to enter, right?”

To her surprise, the small cat nodded.

“Very well... I hope you won't scratch my frame again. Next time, just mewl if your master forgot to take you home.”

With that said, the portrait opened, to Harry's astonishment. He had never thought that someone could enter the Tower using this trick. Smiling in a cat's way, he jumped in the passageway, and found himself in the red and gold common room. Transforming into himself, he quickly spoke the appropriate words to add a secluded corner of said room as a destination for his ring.

He then tried to climb the stairs to the girl's dorms, but the stairs transformed into a slide, in the way it usually did when a boy tried to climb it. Thinking about that, he transformed into his cat form again, and tried to climb the stairs again. This time, the protection against boys failed to register his changed form. He reflected that, in the case it had happened, he would still have the sparrow form to fly over the obstacle. His smile widened, and he headed for Ginny's dorm.

Reaching the second year dorm door, he transformed briefly to turn the doorknob, before turning into his cat form again. No need to frighten the girls, he thought. He looked around, taking in the beds set in a circle in the round room. All beds had their curtains closed, but he noticed the trunks and recognized Ginny's. After all, their name was etched on them. His cat form climbed onto her bed.

She looked like she had had some nightmares, judging by the crumbled covers and sweaty forehead, so he went to her face, purring and licking her cheeks, trying to wake her while unconsciously comforting her. She stirred, and hugged him, before registering that something was in her bed.

Her chocolate eyes flew open, and she noticed the grinning cat beside her. His green eyes were fixed on her.

"Harry?" she asked in a squeaky voice.

The cat merely nodded, before licking her hand and pushing its small head onto it, like all cats did. However, knowing that it was him, the move was incredibly sensual as well. She gasped, and, smiling, scratched the sensitive skin behind his ears. Giving in to the animal instincts, he began to purr, and her smile widening, she caressed the furry beast until he lied on his back, licking his paws. She began to giggle lightly at the situation, and the cat's head shot up, before taking in the situation. He straightened and transformed back into his usual shape, still lying on his back.

Blushing, he shot her an annoyed look. "It's not funny."

"Yes it is." Seeing his disgruntled look, she steered the conversation away, and hugged him. "Enough of that. How are you, Harry?"

"I'm... doing fine, I guess, considering that I only recovered my memory less than 36 hours ago."

She hugged him more tightly. "I'm sorry, we couldn't reach you, and..."

He kissed her hair, trying to prevent her incoming sobs. "It's alright. Well... it wasn't for a while, but we are fine, now, aren't we?"

Ginny smiled through her watery eyes. "Yes, we are."

They stayed that way for a few minutes, until she spoke again.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?"

"You are staying there, now, right?"

He looked into her eyes, and felt her insecurity about him and the world. However, he couldn't lie to her.

"I will be, Gin. But I promised to the muggles who took me in to spend some time there, too." He smiled, thinking about his hideaway. "Although I can spend a day per day with you, sometimes."

She looked at him, not quite understanding his meaning. "Care to elaborate for this stupid girl?"

He chuckled. "You're not stupid, stupid."

"Hey!"

She propped herself on her arm and slapped his shoulder, before lying her head on his chest again, while he continued. "I found that I own a set of rooms where time is slowed. I can spend four hours inside while only one would have been elapsed outside. If you wish..."

"Yes?"

"You can accompany me there now, and we would have..." he looked at his watch, "six hours there, before breakfast."

She raised her head and looked him in the eye. "Harry Potter, is this a manoeuvre to bring a defenceless young girl into your bedroom?"

Taking her smirk into account, he played along. "Why, yes, my dear, and I expect the young girl in question to agree, even if she's far from being defenceless."

She blushed, and they chuckled some more.

After some more time hugging comfortably, she spoke again. "Well... I agree, then. Perhaps you'll tell me what happened to the boy I... I knew."

He frowned at the prospect of spending six hours telling his story, but smiled nonetheless, as he was going to spend these hours with Ginny.

"Okay, Gin. I just hope that I won't have to repeat the whole story each time I meet someone."

"Are you planning on meeting more girls in their bed, young man?"

She was smirking at this, and, smiling, he played his part. "Well... you never know."

She slapped his shoulder again. "You prat!"

He laughed quietly, and remembered that she was still in her nightshirt. "You know, Ginny, if you are going to spend six hours with me, you might want to take a change of clothes as well."

She stared at him for a second before erupting in laughter, making some of the other dorm inhabitants stir in their bed. Seeing his confused face, she laughed again, although quietly this time, her hand on her mouth. When she calmed herself, she waggled her eyebrows and asked "What are you suggesting, Harry Potter?"

Seeing his sudden blush, rivalling with her hair colour, she chuckled some more. After a full minute of this, she tried to recover her normal breathing, while he began to turn his usual colour.

“Okay, Harry, I’ll come with you. And I’ll bring a change of clothes. Do I need anything else?”

“Take your wand, you never know if you’ll need it afterwards.”

She looked at him with a sudden thoughtful frown.

“What?” he asked.

“If you want, I can bring a Quick-Notes quill.”

“What for?”

“If you want to write your story so that you won’t have to repeat it again and again, it would be useful.”

He looked at her in wonder. “Of course! You’re an angel, Gin.” And he kissed her cheek.

She blushed, and he found her so adorable, in her nightshirt with her hair in disarray, blushing in the morning light, that he bent again, and kissed her other cheek, his heart beating.

Several seconds passed by before they shook themselves awake.

“I’ll wait for you in the common room, Gin.”

“Wait! What if there is someone there already? I know that several five and seven years go there early to study for their OWLs and NEWTs.”

He thought about for a moment, before reaching a conclusion. “We’ll go from here then. Do you mind if I make it so that we come back right here?”

She didn't quite understand his question, and Harry explained about his travelling ring a bit more, before she agreed. While she fetched some clothes, her wand, and her Quick-Notes quill, he quietly spoke the words to add Ginny's bed to his list of locations, a smile floating on his lips.

They then portkeyed out of the room using the ring, heading towards his hideaway. They were greeted by Hedwig, who had understandably spent a long time waiting, and who only calmed herself when Harry and Ginny gave her some more bacon and promised that she would be released soon.

The next six hours were spent with Harry reliving and recounting his year, while Ginny had matching emotions. They laughed when he told her about his summer job, they cried when he recounted the sad events that had happened to him or his friends. At the end of this, the Quick-Note quill was worn out, but he promised to buy her one the same day in Diagon Alley, as he had to buy the usual wizard's stuff again: a wand, a trunk, robes, cauldron, and the like.

They had also used several scrolls of parchment, astutely beginning a new one when Harry recounted a different event of the elapsed year. That way, they could separate some private events from his global story which he had agreed to give to Dumbledore. To protect the involved muggles from prying wizards, they had also decided beforehand to change their names in the recounting. Not that Dumbledore would go immediately to them, but firstly, you never knew, and secondly, information leaks could be expected.

In the long time they spent together, Ginny also told him about what had occurred in the Headmistress' office with Sirius. Harry was quite taken aback to discover what had been done to his mother, and vowed to spend more time with his newfound sister, starting today.

After promising to meet her again that evening, and warning her about his possible appearance directly in her bed, they portkeyed back in said bed and separated.

Harry disappeared towards his hideaway again, while Ginny went to get some 'late' breakfast. Even if Harry had provided some food in his

rooms, thanks to the magical plate, she was now, six hours later, hungry again.

During the breakfast, she notified Ron, Hermione and Megan that she had some more input from Harry. She wrote the same thing, as well as asking for a meeting in the Room of Requirements, on four small bits of parchment, and gave them to Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, and Sirius.

Once everyone was there, she read them what she and Harry had decided to tell from his story. When, as predicted by Harry, Dumbledore asked for the parchments themselves, she only allowed him to copy them through a spell, which he did.

During breakfast, and also afterwards while meeting with her friends and teachers, Ginny was sporting a wide smile. The smile didn't leave her face for the rest of the class-less day either.

That morning, Harry came back to his muggle bedroom with Hedwig, and decided to use her to send a message. The owl's perception of time was surely skewed because of her stay in his hideaway, and she surely wasn't to be missed by muggles should she go hunting now. Besides, there was someone he wanted to meet quite rapidly.

Mr. Black,

You don't know me, but I recently came across your story, and it seems that we are related. In fact, it seems that you are my godfather. You'll understand that I want to meet you quite quickly, then. Can you arrange a time for our reunion? I'm able to come to Hogwarts on a moment's notice.

Yours sincerely,

Harry James Potter

While Harry tied the letter to Hedwig's leg, he couldn't suppress a grin about his cheeky remark concerning Hogwarts. He then looked at his owl intently.

“There you are, girl. Take this to Sirius Black, please. Can you wait for his answer?”

Said owl hooted indignantly, as if he was questioning her post owl abilities. When she departed through the window, he laughed to himself. She was certainly the proudest owl he had ever met.

Like Ginny, he took a ‘late’ breakfast. Michael looked sleepy while Joan seemed anxious. A bit afterwards, they went upstairs. After preparing himself for a few minutes, Harry suddenly felt as if he was observed. Turning around, he jumped upon noticing the lithe frame of Joan in the doorway. She was even more anxious than during the breakfast, and he didn’t know why.

“Hiya, Joan. What’s up? You seem-” his breath was cut short as she lunged and hugged him. Hugging her back, he wondered what caused her state, apart from his future departure.

After sitting on the bed, she admitted that, as the year went by, she had been more and more attracted to him. At his startled look, she giggled through her tears and told him about his qualities, making him blush.

“But I’m not here to try to catch you. I mean... I could try, but you are obviously smitten to another.”

If that was possible, he blushed even more, and she giggled again, before turning serious again. “I’d like to know her, you know.”

“I’ll try to come back often. And I’ll ask my... wizard friends to come too.” He smirked. “Kevin would be delighted. Actually...” He looked at her with a calculating look.

“What?”

“I’m going to buy some stuff this afternoon. Wizard stuff. Would you like to tag along?”

“I don’t know... is it dangerous?”

“Well,” he scratched his head, “after the attack of tonight, things should be fine...”

“WHAT? Which attack? How do you know, you didn’t leave the house...”

At his shameful look, her mouth opened wide.

“I did.” He wanted to tell her about his visions, and his role in the incoming war, but rightfully felt that it would put her in even greater danger. “I wanted to learn about what had happened in the magical world while I wasn’t there, and I also wanted to meet... her. It has been a year, Joan, and we had much to say to each other.”

“How comes you are not tired, then?” His crooked smile taught her the answer. “Oh right. Magic, huh?”

He nodded, and she shuffled closer to him. After a few minutes, he started to feel uncomfortable. “Err... Joan?”

She didn’t answer, and he was starting to feel a wet feeling where her head was resting against his side. Gently pushing her a little, he was met by her tears.

“What is it, Joan? You know you can tell me.”

She smiled weakly through her tears, and attempted to speak once. At his worried glance, she gathered her wits, and started again.

“That’s it, Gabriel. I can tell you, but once gone, I’m not sure to be able to find somebody to hear me out. Especially after... after... what happened... you know?”

He looked at her for a second, before hugging her again. “I’m sorry, Joan. I’ll come as often as I can, you know that.”

“It won’t be the same.”

He stayed silent for a time, trying to put up a difficult sentence.

“I don’t want to shock you, but... what about our friends?”

“What do you mean?”

“Kevin, Tamara, Jason?”

“Yes, I knew you were speaking about them.” She smiled.

“Do you think... would it be better for you, if... I don’t know how to say it.”

She shrugged. “Just say it.”

“Can you tell them?”

She didn’t answer, and stayed silent for a long time. Thinking he had messed up, he tried to apologize.

“I’m sorry, Joan. Forget I ever mentioned it.”

“No.”

“Err... what?”

“You’re right, you know. It has been almost a year. I can deal with it, now. Well... better, at least. I will tell them. Today, so that I won’t lose the courage.”

“I’m proud of you, Joan.”

They hugged for a while, until Joan’s wristwatch beeped the hour. So as not to be late, they separated, and finished preparing themselves to go to Jason’s place.

After greeting Jason’s parents, they met him in the attic, where he was arranging the chairs for their meeting. They sat and made some

small talk, waiting for Kevin and Tamara. After fifteen minutes, Harry stood up and began pacing. After five more minutes, he couldn't wait aimlessly, and asked Jason if he could read the old family tome again. Jason nodded, and fetched the book, before laying it the desk and opening it at the same page as before.

Harry spent the next twenty minutes perusing the book, especially around Godric's history. There wasn't much more than what had told Jason the previous time, but, now that he had his original memory, everything fell into place differently. He also browsed the book, and found that quite nothing was said about Godric's parents. In fact, his ancestor was cousin of the first generation described in the book, and no higher ancestor was listed. If he could find a book speaking about Gryffindor's ancestry in a wizarding library, he could complete Jason's genealogy tree, too. Smiling, he turned around, and was a bit surprised at the vision in front of him.

While he was reading, Jason and Joan had talked a bit more, and they were now hugging gently. Joan had her back to him, but Jason saw him. Harry, understanding that the boy was going to break the hug to spare his feelings, raised his thumb. Jason got the message, and relaxed imperceptibly.

At the same time, angry voices could be heard coming from the stairs. They went to the door, but it opened before they reached it. Or rather, it slammed open, and Kevin walked through, his features distorted. Behind him, Tamara followed, equally angry, although Harry felt that she was holding it back as much as possible. Her temper was famous, and the fire element was always behind, ready to show itself.

Kevin continued his rant. "Can you believe it? That dumb-"

"It's my father you're talking about!"

"It doesn't make him agreeable in the least."

Without even grasping the bottom of the argument, the three friends felt that it had been going for some time, somewhat explaining their

late arrival. Jason tried to stop them, but they continued their argument, as Tamara couldn't let the insult pass.

"You don't have the right to judge him."

"You said even worse before, it seems to me."

"Perhaps, but it's my dad!"

Joan stood up and went between them. "Uh... guys?"

They ignored her, and, turning around her, continued their dispute.

"Why does he want to move again? Ah yes... 'Difference of point of view'."

"You know he can't tell you everything, his job-"

"His job doesn't have anything to do with it!"

"How do you know?"

"I guessed!"

Sighing, Harry decided that it could have been the perfect moment to actually have a wand. He stood up, being decided to end the row before it became bloody. As their friends had proven, reasonable interaction had been ineffective, so he was going to blame his magic. He gathered a bit of energy, and, touching Kevin's shoulder, released it while uttering "Abracadabra." After all, they knew that he was a wizard, so he had to keep up his cover.

The result was sudden, and spectacular.

Kevin jumped at least two feet in the air, yelling in fright, before slumping on the ground, holding his shoulder in pain.

Harry then turned towards Tamara. Seeing that Kevin's state didn't stop her angry stare, he held his hand right in front of his chest,

hidden from his other friends, and summoned a bit of energy. When sparks began to dance around his hand, she finally noticed him and the other two, and bit back her sentence. Harry then concentrated to bring his energy back into him. He had never done it before, but it seemed quite the same as pushing the energy outwards.

Afterwards, seeing the hanging jaws of Joan and Jason, he shrugged, and said "What? I'm a wizard after all."

Kevin stood up, massaging his shoulder. "You hurt me."

Harry suddenly looked uneasy. "Errm... sorry, pal. I had to."

"No hassle, mate." Kevin smiled. "Besides, I have what I wanted yesterday." At Harry's questioning gaze, Kevin's smile widened. "A demonstration."

Remembering the day before, Harry smiled too. "You got it. Now that you are calmer, can you tell us about your row?"

Kevin's mood instantly darkened, as well as Tamara's. Harry raised his hands. "Calmly, please."

Kevin breathed deeply, before speaking. "Her dad wants to move away."

Harry held up his hand in front of Tamara, preventing her acid reply. "Why does that anger you?"

He looked up, startled at the question, before blushing. "I... I don't want her to go."

Everybody looked at him in wonder. After a moment, his good-natured spirit rose again, and, looking at Tamara, he smiled. "There, I said it. Sorry about my comments on your dad, but I want you to stay."

She blushed too, and smiled. "And I'm sorry to have shown my temper about that. My dad is less than agreeable at the moment. And I want to stay too."

They stepped toward each other, and hugged. After a minute, the others began to whistle and catcall, and they felt forced to separate. Everyone sat in the provided chairs, and everyone looked at Harry.

“Well... I’m wondering about the whole thing. I can’t tell you everything, guys, otherwise wizard cops would get my hide. You know, there are laws forcing us not to reveal our existence. They date back from the middle ages, when our kin was hunted, as you might remember from the history lessons. These laws haven’t been repealed, and we can’t parade on the streets. As long as you don’t shout what I tell you there too, you shouldn’t have any problem.”

Kevin looked at him mischievously. “What if we do?”

Harry looked at him seriously, before answering. “First, you’ll be considered like a madman by the regular people. Then, some wizards will arrive, and they will erase parts of your memory.”

They looked at him, flabbergasted. “They can do that?”

“Yes they can, and they do it quite often, each time a magical event happens with an audience. After all,” he smirked, “it’s not a good thing to witness things like a dragon nowadays.”

“Dragons exist?” Joan blurted, before putting her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide.

Harry cringed a little. He had to watch over what he was revealing to them. Too much, and Aurors would catch them at one point.

Jason looked at him intently. “Why are you telling us?”

“Sorry?”

“If your cops can erase our memory, why don’t you leave, and they come here and remove our memories of you? Why don’t you do it yourself, in fact? You can do it, right?”

Harry looked at him in shock, before shaking his head, looking at his hands. "I could do it, right. I could call upon them to do that, yes. But I would never do that to friends. I mean, I would remember you and the good time we passed together, and not you? What would be the meaning of friendship, then? Of life?"

He raised his head and was shocked again, but now it was the awed expression they were all sporting. Without a word, they stood up, one after the other, and pulled him into a group hug, muttering thanking words.

After they separated, each going to his or her seat, Harry spoke again.

"You know, in fact, I should erase your memories." He smirked at the shocked faces that looked at him now, before becoming serious again. "You know, there isn't exactly peace in the wizarding world nowadays. There is a... madman of sorts, with many followers, and he's trying to destabilize the magical government."

"There is a magical government?" Jason was suddenly ecstatic, his diplomatic side awakened.

Harry looked at him impassively. "Yes, there is. They are holding us together against that madman's attacks. Should they fall, the... regular government wouldn't be able to stop him. And... I have a role to play, too." Because of the events in his two school years at Hogwarts, Harry had already come to the conclusion that he had something to do about Voldemort.

They looked at him, flabbergasted. "I won't tell you more because you might be in danger should anyone overhear you. Just for you to know, the previous... madman like his one had lived something like fifty years ago. That one succeeded in destroying the magical government of Germany in 1933, and he was killed ten years later. I don't have to remind you of what happened in the world at that time?"

If Harry thought that they couldn't be surprised than before, he was in for naught. They all fainted.

Cursing himself and his lack of foresight, he went to the nearest bathroom, and, using a wet tissue, woke them one after the other. He spent the remaining of the morning discussing about his life as a wizard. When midday chimed at the attic's grandfather clock, they looked at each other, still having things to discuss.

Jason started. "If you want to stay, no problem. We can make a salad and a few sandwiches in the kitchen, and eat here. My parents have been invited for a meal outside."

Joan nodded. "Dad is not eating home today either."

"My parents are there, but I can call them to notify them about my stay." Kevin said, before looking at Tamara imploringly.

"Well... dad won't be happy about it, but I'll try to convince him."

Jason stood up. "Come down, I'll show you to the kitchen and the phone, then."

He brought them to the kitchen first and the phone afterwards, so that Kevin and Tamara could come back after calling home. He then went back to the kitchen with Joan and Harry to start whipping up a small meal. After five minutes, Kevin came back.

"Took you a long time." observed Harry.

He huffed. "I spend forty seconds. Tamara is still at it, though. I guess he doesn't want."

Effectively, Tamara entered the kitchen a few minutes afterwards, crestfallen, and muttering darkly. She looked at them, and shook her head. "He doesn't want to. He wants me to come back right now, or he'll come here and take me back."

They shuddered. They began to apologize about it, but she raised her hand. "It's his way. He's generally kind and calm, but... something... has happened recently. I will try to convince him to allow me to come back later. I have to go."

Kevin was on the verge of exploding. "Let me go with you, I will show him! I will!"

"Actually, Kevin, you know that his temper is worse than mine, and he's also stronger than you. If you don't want to be used as punching bag, you'd stay here."

"What about me?" intervened Harry.

They looked at him, before Kevin's eyes lit up suddenly. "Good idea! You could erase his memory, and!"

"I won't do that to friends, Kevin, nor would I do it to anyone without a good reason. It's quite a crime, otherwise, you know? My only reason to go there is to try to understand his reasons for leaving, and turn them down if possible. Reasonably."

Kevin looked dejected at this, and could only nod in acceptance. Tamara and Harry said their goodbyes, and left the three would-be cooks.

They left Jason's place, and started their walk towards Tamara's. After a few minutes, she asked "It's not the real reason, isn't it?"

He didn't answer for some time, and she began to think that he hadn't heard the question, when he suddenly looked around and, noticing that nobody was there, he answered "No, it's not. We have to talk."

"What about?" she answered, even if she had a good idea of what his next question would be.

"What happened, after I left the... the Great Hall?"

"I left, too." She looked down. "I used my element to leave and landed home, in my father's study actually. He was there and took care of me, but he asked why I used that mean of transportation. You see, it's very draining, and he taught me to use it only in a case of an

emergency. The... wizards, in the Great Hall... they were looking at me as if I was a... a prize, and I had to flee. One of the female ones-

“A witch.”

“What?”

“Female wizards are called witches.”

“Oh. Of course. One witch told me to flee, too, after giving me a note. It has been burnt in the travel, said my father, but he succeeded in copying it. The note said to train you, but seeing what you did to Kevin earlier, you have trained already.” They both smiled at that, before Harry frowned.

“That witch, how was she? Was she young, tall, with an eagle on her robe, and a... a stick in her brown hair? Was she looking like a... a lunatic?”

She thought about it, before stopping brusquely. “Yes! That’s her! How do you know?”

“I shouldn’t tell you that, especially because there is secrecy around it, but as you know about me, I guess you can know about her. She’s like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a witch and an elemental. An Air one.”

Tamara looked thoughtful for a few seconds, before starting to walk again, Harry walking beside her. “That’s why, then. Is she the one who trained you?”

“Yes.”

“Did she tell you about the powers?”

“No, she just taught me to... to ‘ground’ my energy.”

She looked at him blankly, before laughing. “How appropriate!”

“I know, I know.”

“And you found how to strike someone... like Kevin... alone?”

“It was the same thing: gathering some energy in the hand.”

She looked at him thoughtfully, before nodding. “That’s not how I learned it, but it was efficient nonetheless.”

“You learned it... who taught you?”

“Well... who do you know with a flaring temper, closely related to me?”

“Your dad? Your dad is a fire elemental like you?”

“Shush!” She looked around, but noticed nobody. Sighing, she answered “Yes, he is. Remember that I told you about the fact that the elemental powers came from the parents? It’s genetic, I said, then.”

“Oh. Right. I forgot. Speaking about him, why does he want to leave the area?”

“Remember that I told you that wizards were a legend?”

“Yes.”

“Well... it appears that the high-ranking elementals, like my father, know a bit more, and he’s quite fearful of them, even if he doesn’t say why. As I told him about a great hall full of wizards, he’s afraid that they could trace me to our house.”

“I’d better not tell him that I’m one, then. But, speaking of tracing, I’m not sure about that. I think it’s impossible if you didn’t use magic. I mean, ‘regular’ magic, like a spell.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, but I can get the information.”

“Do that, please. I don’t want to leave the town either.” She mumbled the last part, blushing in her hands.

Even if he couldn’t quite see her blush, Harry sensed something, and prodded her. “Is it about Kevin?”

She looked at him with a startled expression, before turning away, but her eyes had betrayed her and Harry knew that his intuition had been true.

She turned towards him. “You’d better not tell anyone, especially Kevin.”

“Tam, he said it already, and in front of you! How fair is that to him? I won’t tell him if you do it.”

She turned back towards the walkway, mumbling.

“What?”

“I said ‘Okay, I’ll do it.’ Satisfied?”

“Actually...” He looked at her surprised face, before finishing his sentence. “Yes.”

“You prat!”

“...says the girl in love.”

She punched his shoulder. “Shut it!”

Massaging his shoulder, he laughed, before conceding the point.  
“Okay, okay.”

They walked for a few more minutes, before he spoke again. “Is it still a long way?”

“No, two minutes.”

“Even if I don’t tell him about my magic-”

“And you’d better not slip up! I don’t want to be forced to leave tonight!”

“-I can say that you are training me. After all, it would have been true, if I wasn’t a wizard.”

She stopped walking and looked at him thoughtfully, her eyes wide, then narrowing deviously.

As she wasn’t moving, he grew worried, and asked “Is it such a bad idea?”

She shook herself. “Not at all. In fact, it’s the best idea I could think of. However, I’ll ask him to train you himself.”

“What? Why?”

They started to walk again while she explained. “Because his only hobby in life is the training of elementals. He couldn’t be part of the regular schools because of his lack of respect for any hierarchy.” She chuckled. “No surprise here, he’s a fire elemental like me. He loves to teach, however, and he’d be glad to stay if only to teach you.”

“You seem to be quite sure of yourself.”

“I am.”

Harry thought about it for a while, before remembering his own life. "But... but I can't! I have to go back to the wizarding world! I promised to stay until the end of term, but I will have to leave this summer."

She looked at him, with a grin not unlike the famous Cheshire cat. "Believe me, that will be enough for him to disregard the whole story. He's quick to anger himself, but he's also quick to forget."

"Oh. Okay, then."

They approached a small house with a red sports car parked in front of it, and Tamara took the house keys from her purse. Shushing him, she opened the door and entered, motioning him to follow her. She pushed him in the den and indicated a seat. Once he was installed, she yelled. "Dad! I'm home!"

Harry wasn't quite sure of what was awaiting him. The man came from a door visibly leading to the basement, and looked at Tamara with anger in his eyes. However, her next words quickly calmed him.

"I brought you a student."

Somewhere, in a huge and deserted building...

The man was working in a deserted office. It was late at night, and shadows loomed around him. Some people could actually call it a dream, while others would tag it as a nightmare.

Actually, Broderick Bode didn't care for other's misconceptions of his job. Anyway, as an Unspeakable, he couldn't talk about it: a Wizard's Oath had been sworn to ensure that he wouldn't speak about it voluntarily, and several charms had been cast so that he wouldn't leak information involuntarily. However, when the Unspeakable Council decided that a chunk of information was deemed safe for other people to know, they had the ability to speak about it.

After his explanation of the escaped man's identity to the two old wizards, and the following heated discussion about the impossibility for them to get the items back, he had returned to the pile of books

that had been taken from the old Auror's trunk upon his coming back from Azkaban. Perusing the book, he absently remembered the wizened Auror's reaction to it, and the shock they finally had upon actually reading those books, in perfect state despite their age.

In the few dozen tomes, there were many useless things, like rantings about family feuds or kitchen recipes. However, the one book he was reading now was one of the first to have been written by the newly-escaped wizard, and its cover creaked each time it was used, as if the blood traitor who had owned the skin binding the tome was still trying to rebel.

The book held the most evil spells Bode had ever seen, some even darker than the three Unforgivables. After all, it also depicted the creation of these three spells, and the knowledge-thirsty Broderick bent further, intent on learning about them too.

After a few hours like that, still alone in the wee hours of the morning, he felt capable of taking on the world despite his tired state. He closed the book, stretched, and went to the pensieve-like dark basin. If what he had read was true, in this barrel-sized tub were resting 1000 years' worth of souls. People victims of the Dementors' Kiss, or people victims of a spell designed to have the same effect.

Adava Kedavra.

Unknown to all but the one wizard who had invented it, and now Broderick Bode, the infamous spell was an 'improvement' of an already-existing spell, now forgotten. That first spell's aim was to temporarily remove someone's soul from his body, in order to heal large wounds. It's no wonder that muggles, at that time using alcohol to get the same effect, got to call that state the "little death".

Now that he knew exactly what was in the basin, he got up, stretched, and went to it. He watched the ashen substance tenderly, remembering that it was souls from dead people, some of them having lived a millennium ago.

All Unspeakables knew how to use a pensieve. After all, the item, which was renowned as rare by the ordinary wizard, was one of their

most important work tools. They moved important memories from their mind to the basins, and took them back the following work day. That was with just a little apprehension that Broderick Bode did the same gesture, putting his wand in the ashen matter and dragging a greyish smoke. He then finished the motion and brought the wand tip to his temple.

The next few seconds were chaotic. He felt himself thrown through a dark tunnel and, after a bit of rough handling, saw himself landing in a grey liquid. However, when he looked around, he noticed something strange. And looking up, he understood his error. He screamed in terror as his new fate was revealed to him, but nobody heard.

He wasn't quite in a grey liquid. He was now part of it. He was in a sea of souls, one among thousands, all immortals but each fighting to get a view on the outside world. Inexperienced in this kind of fighting, he quickly lost his footing and began to be drowned in the greyish mist, the light lessening for each step taken down. His was frightened about it, terrified to have to live like this for a long time, but he was also frustrated not to have understood the thing before. It wasn't a pensieve, for Merlin's sake!

While he descended in the liquid, progressively losing all light to enter a swirling and kicking blackness, he remembered his last outside glance. When he had looked up, he had seen himself, or rather his body. He hadn't been wearing the mask, and the wide smile displayed on his features wasn't his own, had never been his own. He could only curse his lack of forethought as his possessed body was left to do whatever he pleased on the world.

He could only hope that the soul he had picked wasn't an evil one. O'Malley's place...

Tamara had been true.

After demonstrating the small tricks he could do with his element, he began to set up a training schedule with an over-enthusiastic Mark O'Malley. Harry was then asked to eat with them before leaving with Tamara again towards Jason's. On their way, they invented a story to

make Tamara's dad's change of mind believable, while removing any reference to the elementals. Harry humorously complained that he was to admit being a wizard whereas she hid her elemental powers to them. She blushed at this, and that started a long talk about secrecy and friendship.

Once at Jason's, they met with the others. Joan and Jason were quite happy to hear the news, but Kevin was downright ecstatic. He went as far as kissing her on both cheeks, something that he had never done before. It calmed him, finally, and he blushed profusely.

After this, an uncomfortable moment occurred. Joan, following Harry's advice, and holding his hand for support, told them about her rape with a trembling voice. They all hugged her compassionately, without displaying the disgusting pity she was wary of. They were her friends, and acted accordingly. Tamara then understood why Joan had been so insightful when she had told the story of the school roof, the day before. And Jason, seemingly ignoring Harry's hand, put an arm around Joan's shoulders. After a few minutes, Joan looked at Harry and removed her hand from his, while setting her head in Jason's shoulder. No sound was exchanged at that moment, but everyone understood.

After several minutes during which everyone remembered everything that had been said and done, Harry got up, having some shopping to do. He had proposed to Joan to go with him, but he also didn't want to risk his friends' health: if everybody came, he wasn't sure to be able to track them all in the various shops. And some of the items there were downright dangerous if you didn't know how to handle them. He explained all this, and was surprised to see them agree with him. Understanding hit him when he saw his four friends sitting in couples, comfortably installed. They were digesting today's information, and were quite content to just be together.

Just before he left, though, they all agreed to meet at some time in the future to discuss the revenge on the jocks. Harry also reassured Joan about his presence at home for the evening meal. Even if they had changed their view about each other, they were still best friends. They all hugged him, and Jason accompanied him downstairs. Once at the door, he hugged him again, thanking him about Joan. Harry

then left, and took the Underground towards King's cross station. He didn't know the Underground network much, but the pedestrian pathway from the station to the Leaky Cauldron pub was ingrained in his memory. Just before entering the pub, though, he hid in a dark alley and took his Gabriel Swift identification paper out. Concentrating on the picture, he morphed himself to look like the person on the picture. He then entered the pub.

Nothing had changed there, except the stories which were swapped around. Almost everyone was talking about the attack from the previous night, and some rumours were exchanged on the reason about its failure. Smirking mentally, Harry went to the back door and opened the passage towards Diagon Alley.

As he had witnessed in this night's dream, almost nothing had been damaged by the attack. On top of that, the holes in the structures had been filled; the broken beams had been magically sutured; and the charred spots on the ground had been cleaned. The Alley looked like always. Well... Harry had only seen it with the school rush, so he could only imagine that it was normal. For sure, there was place to move in the streets and the shops weren't overrun by teenagers.

His first stop was going to be Gringotts. He had much to do there, and it was required for even thinking buying something. His meagre allowance wasn't allowing extras, and he had had to take from what little savings he still had from his job at the fair to even buy the Underground ticket. Reflecting about it on his way to the bank, he decided to add Diagon Alley to his ring. He looked around, and noticing signs indicating the Apparation entry point in the alley, went there to add it to his ring. This done, he entered into the bank of the magical world, and took his place in the queue.

A few minutes afterwards, he arrived in front of a goblin. Harry had witnessed the other customers, and noticed that the area around the cashier seemed to be impervious to eavesdropping, as he couldn't make a sound from what the man before him had said. It was important, if he wanted his identity to be hidden. He greeted the goblin politely, and asked if it was possible to enter a vault without a key, as his key seemed to be lost. When he gave his name in answer

to a request from the small creature, he saw something few humans could report having witnessed: a nonplussed goblin.

Shaking his head, the goblin exited his through a door in the back of his booth, and a good five minutes went by before he came back. He told Harry that he was going to be received by the bank manager, in an office to which he gave the directions on a charmed card.

The card also served to call the elevator, and it disappeared when Harry entered a large office which door had been held open for him by a wrinkled goblin. Well, goblins were always wrinkled, but this one was positively ancient, his head was lolling, and he spoke with a low and broken voice. His eyes, though, were always alert.

“Good aft’rnoon, m’ster Pott’r.”

“Err... good afternoon, sir.”

“It ha’ come t’ our ’ttention tha’ you’re no’ dead ’nymore.”

“Well... I think... you could say so, yes.”

“We’ve to v’rify your ’dentity, thou’h.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Good. Plea’e step ’n tha’ plate, th’n.”

Harry stepped on the square platform that had been designated by the goblin. After a few seconds, a disincarnate voice uttered his full name.

The bank manager repeated it. “Harr’ J’mes Pott’r.”

“Yes, sir?”

The goblin began to read from a stack of parchments on his desk. “As you h’ve bee’ deemed dea’, you’ vault’ h’ve been g’ven to yo’r l’gal guar’ian. Your ’uggle gu’rdians bein’ ‘ead too, yo’r ’ccount h’s been

transf'rrred to th' newl'-free' S'rius Black, as mugg'e wills c'n't int'rferre with our 'ccounts. H'wever, said S'rius Black didn't 'pen the vault' at 'll, so 't can be turn'd back 'nto your poss'ssion. It 'lso seems th't you don't hav' a key an'more. Our keys 're magic'l, and tu'n back h're whe' they 're lost or 'n the proc'ss of 'eing d'maged. Here 't is."

Harry was feeling the beginning of a monstrous headache coming up, but the little he could understand, as well as the proffered key were a good indication that his vault had been given back to him. He felt a bit uneasy about removing the vault from his godfather's assets, but the man hadn't touched it at all, so he couldn't be in great need. After thanking the old goblin, he went back to the bank lobby, and waited for a goblin-driven cart to be available. After a few more minutes, he could go back to his vault which had been left untouched for a whole year.

Well... that's what he thought. When he saw the inside of the vault, he stopped, gasped for breath, and promptly fainted.

Nothing could have prepared him at the immaculate sight in front of him.

Nothing.

The vault was empty.

To be continued in next chapter: Shopping Issues...

Now that the girls are settled,  
The story has been whittled.  
To discern what will happen,  
Leave a review, use your pen.

## Chapter 30 – Shopping Issues

Harry woke up in a small office, upon hearing a goblin calling his name and feeling a wet tissue on his forehead. Seeing that the young wizard was awakening, the small creature gave him his glasses. Harry looked around in wonder, before remembering what had happened.

“What... my vault... empty!” he stuttered.

“Of course it is.”

The collected stance of the goblin brought some calm in Harry, even if that was short lived, as the first thing he wanted to do now, was hex the goblin into next week. The two things that prevented him from doing so, though, were the position of power the goblin had on him now, and also the mere fact that he didn't have a wand. He sat up, and took the goblin in. In a strange way, he looked familiar.

“Do I... Do I know you?” he asked.

The goblin looked up, surprised.

To ease the resulting silence, Harry felt that he had to elaborate. “I think I saw you the first time I went in my vault.”

“Well... I'm quite surprised, as, usually, wizards prefer not to recognize us, talking to us as if we were all the same.” the goblin answered. “The only change in their attitude is in regard to our responsibilities.” The goblin eyes glazed over while he ranted on his job. “I noticed that several families were more agreeable now that I don't drive the carts anymore, and-”

“That's it!” Harry interrupted. “You drove the cart. It has been almost three years now... Griltook? Is it your name?”

The goblin chuckled, an unnerving sound if you didn't know he was. “Griphook, Mr Potter. Nice to meet you again.”

Harry grinned. "Nice to meet you too."

"You don't look like the Harry Potter I remember from then, though. If the manager hadn't vouched for your identity, I'd be sure it's not you."

"Sorry, Griphook, but I don't want the other wizards to know about my return as of yet, and I disguised myself."

After the formal introduction, his memories came back full force, and he became restless with worry. "Griphook, what about my vault? How comes it was empty?"

"I should perhaps not tell you all this, Mr Potter, but since you managed to remember me, I will. After all, any wizard remembers a goblin has gained the right to get some information... for free."

That sent Harry's train of thought through the proverbial window "You mean, you can ask for a price for any information?"

"We could, but normally, old wizarding families know that beforehand and draw a contract accordingly, and the muggleborns' parents are informed about the banking system by their school. You didn't know about it? Mr Potter?"

The young teenager's face was distorted in anger. Harry Potter was furious. His old Headmaster had hidden information from him, once again! How many times will he stumble on personal information by accident? Trying to calm down, he swallowed his anger, storing the memory of the conversation in his mind for future reference. He then looked at the goblin. "Sorry about that. I guess my Headmaster didn't think it good to inform me."

"No wonder, here. He had been in charge of your account on your behalf. Although the vaults have been transferred to Sirius Black upon your rumoured death. Speaking of which... we are deeply sorry about that. We normally check several times for false rumours when someone dies, but, as you know, it has been almost a year, and..."

“Don’t worry. But, tell me... you said... ‘vaults’? Plural?”

“Of course, Mr Potter.” Seeing the teen’s dumbfounded expression, the goblin understood that Harry knew next to nothing to the banking system, and decided to help him a little. After all, if the folder on his desk was accurate, he would also gain something from it.

“Mr Potter, I’m going to make you a proposal.”

Startled at the goblin’s serious tone, but eased when he saw the gentle look sent his way, Harry nodded.

“I’d like to become your personal account manager.” Griphook sensed that he had to explain each new term to Harry, and acted on it. “A personal account manager does exactly this: he manages your personal account, with all the vaults involved. The only fee is a percentage on the benefits.”

“Benefits? But...”

Griphook held his fine hand, and went to read a paper, speaking in a plain voice. “Harry Potter, you own two vaults, from which the withdrawal restrictions set by Albus Dumbledore have been removed due to your... death. The first vault was opened by your parents to be a trust fund for your education. Hogwarts’ fees have been taken from it, twice, but besides your own withdrawals, nothing changed. Because of your... death, everything in it had been transferred to your family vault, which holds-”

“Wait a minute, please! I have a ‘family vault’? What is it?”

“Most wizarding families own a family vault, as well as some personal ones. The family vault holds the common assets of the family. In some cases, it also holds some heirlooms, books, or important items stored here for protection.”

Harry, remembering the infamous vault 713 from his first year, could only nod along while the goblin continued his explanation.

“The personal vaults are seldom used, apart from trust funds like in your case, Mr Potter. I noticed, though, that there were more and more people using them over the years. As if humans were growing more and more distrustful of each other. Well, I can’t judge them, though.”

Harry shook his head, trying to remember all this. “You spoke about benefits? That you’d be paid with a percentage on these?”

“Yes. Our contracts indicate that a five percent margin on the benefits is taken for the account manager. That’s on top of all other fees. The main fee allows us to manage the vaults themselves, and it is a fixed amount, depending on the vault size and security measures.”

“I guess I don’t need my trust fund vault, then? Especially if it is empty.”

“You can keep it. In fact, the first personal vault opened after a family one is free. And you can use it as temporary storage, or if you don’t want people to know that you actually own a large one.”

Harry was thinking about his shame when he had had to withdraw money from his full vault with the Weasley behind him, two years ago. The last words of the goblin, though, jarred his train of thoughts.

“Large? How large?”

“I guess that I can’t tell you in words, Mr Potter. You’ll see soon enough.”

“And... why didn’t your manager tell me all this?”

“He thought that you knew how we worked.”

“He didn’t even give me a key for that one vault.”

“That is because you don’t need it. The Potter family, a few generations back, purchased a large vault for their affairs. It’s not as old or as large as some ‘pureblood’ families, but it belongs to the thousand vaults for which security measures are the highest. They don’t need a key, though, and they don’t have a number either. To reach them by the cart, just ask the cart handler for your family vault, and the cart will direct itself accordingly.” He looked down on his desk. “Speaking of security, the Potter patriarch of that time seemed to have been quite paranoid.”

“You... you knew about him?”

“No, but what this document tells me” he raised a parchment full of figures, “is the list of the security measures surrounding the vault. To be able to pay that price, though, the Potter line has continuously been involved in businesses, muggle as well as wizard, and had been quite successful. That’s where the ‘benefits’ come from. And it’s also the job of a personal account manager to look over the investments to warn the account owner of possible ups and downs.”

Harry was looking at him, quite astonished.

“Mr Potter?”

The young wizard shook his head, before looking at the goblin again, trying to find his words.

“How comes... I mean... When did they... No...” he shook his head again. “I didn’t know of all this. In fact, I didn’t know of any of this.” He frowned, then. “I guess I’ll have a talk with Dumbledore.”

“Mr Potter, in the meantime, if you agree on everything, we can sign the contract. I’m not forcing you, though, but while you don’t have a manager, businesses live their own lives.”

“Yes, you’re right. After all, I’m not quite ready to look after investments by myself right now.”

They chuckled at this, and Griphook went to a cupboard to draw a pre-printed contract. While he began filling it, though, he went to ask Harry a question that had been nagging him.

“Mr Potter?”

“Griphook, I think you can call me Harry, now.”

“I’m honoured, but I have to decline, Mr Potter. Our hierarchy would demote me if that was going to be known.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Sorry, then.”

“I’m really honoured, though.”

They stayed silent for a few minutes still, and then Griphook held the contract for Harry’s signature. During the wait, though, Harry had thought about the banking system and had remembered several things from his muggle education. Or lack thereof. And, while he signed the contract, he spoke again.

“Griphook? Is it possible to be able to make purchases without going down in the vaults each time I want to withdraw money?”

“Oh, sure, Mr Potter. There are several ways. After all, few of the purebloods ever use the carts anyway.”

“I can’t imagine Malfoy going down there either.” answered Harry, an amused glint in his eyes at the thought.

“The most commonly used mean to remotely withdraw is a charmed purse. They come in several sized and colours. When you purchase one, it’s linked to your vault, and contains a fixed amount of Galleons, Sickles and Knuts, depending on its size. When you take money out of it, it refills automatically to the said amounts. You can also upend it to remove the coins from it, but when you put it back upright, it refills again. Coins you put in it go straight to your account too, although other items you store in, like keys of jewellery, it will stay there. Only the owner can put a hand in it, anyone else will find it empty.”

“Interesting. I guess I’ll take one, when you’ll show me the sizes and colours. Are there other means?”

Griphook fetched a small parchment explaining the purses, and continued his speech. “Mr Potter, you will have time to read this when I’ll file our contract. You can tell me afterwards. About the other means... well, there is a way to transfer money through money orders. You only have to write the amount on a charmed parchment, and, when the other person signs it, the money is transferred from your vault to his. Almost all Diagon Alley shops have one, especially those which sell expensive items.”

“It’s nice, too. I mean, to buy large items or even houses, I doubt that people will upend their purse that much times, or even carry the gold on their back.”

They chuckled again. Griphook was starting to like this wizard. Unlike many others, he was having a real talk, and that was really refreshing.

“Are these parchments expensive?” asked Harry, who knew already of the concept of checks.

“Not really. And you won’t need more than one. The parchment clears when the deal is complete, and it will be ready for the next. However, there will be a fixed charge added to your account’s primary fee, to reflect your possible use of these.”

Harry thought about it for a moment, before deciding to forego it. After all, he wasn’t going to spend his whole fortune right now, and, as a student, he only needed the charmed purse for his needs.

Griphook wasn’t finished, though. “Mr Potter, from our whole talk, I assume that you have been raised as a muggle before Hogwarts, am I correct?”

“Yes, why?”

“We also have charmed means of payment for muggle shops.”

Harry's interest was piqued at that. "What are they?"

"We propose the same thing as the charmed purse, and the same concept as our transfer parchment, as well as something you know as a credit card, all wrapped in a muggle looking wallet. In fact, only the wallet is magical, as to bring forth muggle money. The card and checks are very muggle, as we have a branch in muggle London, specialized for muggle monetary exchanges. If you choose to take the wallet, your account will look like it is hosted there, in the muggles' point of view."

"Is there an identification paper provided with it?"

"Well, if you were raised as a muggle, Mr Potter, they should have had you some, shouldn't they?"

"They got kind of... destroyed."

"In this case, you can ask either the muggle appropriate service to make you new ones, or the Ministry of Magic will do it too."

Harry looked crestfallen, but lightened quickly as the goblin continued to speak.

"However, we can do it too as a special service to our customers. After all, it's just a bit of paper."

Harry thought about it, and, reflecting about the fact that it was 'just' a bit of paper, reached the conclusion that, if he gets better in Transfiguration, he could try to do it himself. He had a question, though. Taking his 'Gabriel Swift' crumpled identification paper, he gave it to Griphook.

"Could you do so the owner's name displayed on the card and the checks is this one? I don't want to be noticed in the outside world."

Griphook took the paper, and, without even asking, magically straightened it. He then looked between it and Harry for a few times,

before agreeing. He fetched the parchment documenting the few versions of the charmed muggle wallet, and, giving it to Harry, left the office to file the contract.

After a few minutes, during which Harry's choice went to a black leather wallet and a medium brown purse which description indicated that it was lightweight despite holding fifty gold Galleons, ten silver Sickles, and five bronze Knuts. Reading about the numbers made him go back the wallet description, and he discovered that the rate of change was fixed to be twenty percent of every money coming in or out of the wallet. In the same way as the purse, the wallet always had several coins and notes inside it, to a total nearing twenty pounds.

The magical containers also gave him ideas about what a container could do, and, after Griphook's return in the office and more paper signing to get the purse and wallet, he asked the question.

"Griphook, where would I go to buy a school trunk with... special features?"

The goblin looked at him with a wondering expression, quickly replaced by a proud one. "I will not ask about what you want to do with it, but we sometimes have partnership with Tracheus Trunks for them to build the charmed purses like the one you bought. They are situated atop Madam Malkin's, with an entry in an alcove almost hidden after the garment shop. In fact, they are quite overlooked but the majority of people, but the quality of their work is such that their clients are always recommending new ones."

"Are you recommending me, then?" asked Harry with a smile.

It had been a joke, but the goblin looked at him with a serious expression, muttering "I guess I could. With the large estate left by your parents, the account manager of your vaults will be well set."

"What do you mean?"

"You will see about your fortune when you will go in your vault. Concerning my recommendation, I said they were quite successful,

but only three persons work for them, and, to get a trunk in time, you'd have to wait for a long time. If I recommend you, as we are one of their largest clients, you could skip a few seats in the waiting queue."

"Thank you, Griphook, thank you! Although I don't know what to buy exactly, yet." finished Harry, with a pondering expression. He had dragged his heavy trunk for two years, and had wondered several times, if there were ways to reduce its weight. Or bulk. Or both.

"I might have an idea to refine your choice, Mr Potter. Two, in fact. First, go visit your family vault, to see what kind of things you'd want with you. Second, here you go." And Griphook gave Harry a roll of parchment. Unfolding it, Harry noticed that it was an index of the available products.

He was surprised at the vast selection the trunk maker offered. There were regular trunks, although very well made, and there were also lightweight trunks, others that could also be reduced in size through a keyword, and even some that had their interior magically enlarged. The top of the line was one which included the three options, and which offered an inside so big that one person could actually live in it. With each trunk, there could be several options attached to it, like a security measure preventing access to anyone but the rightful owner. Raising his head, he noticed that Griphook was standing and understood that the interview was finished. He thanked the goblin profusely, and left the office. He was surprised to see Griphook follow him out of it, and asked about it.

"We are going to check your wallet and purse out, Mr Potter."

"Ah. Right. I forgot."

"It is fine. This way."

Harry entered another office and the rather young-looking goblin there looked up, startled, at their entrance. The goblins conversed for a short while in a guttural tongue, and Harry found himself owning the

magical purse and wallet soon after. After thanking the goblin and Griphook again, he headed for the goblin cart line again.

After a much longer ride in the bowels of the subterranean complex, and a part where he smelled sulphur, he arrived in front of a large and ornate door with a handprint on it. He glanced at the goblin uneasily.

“Err... what do I do?”

“You mean don’t know, Mr Potter?”

“Well... no, it’s the first time I even see my family vault.”

“You have to open the door yourself, as even the goblins can’t enter high-security vaults. It must be the owner or his family.”

Harry looked at the gruff goblin expectantly. When it was clear that small creature wasn’t going to elaborate, he jumped off the cart and headed towards the hand print. Suspecting that he had to press his hand on it, he did just that, and the massive doors opened slowly.

The sight that graced his eyes at that moment stunned him. His amazement was on par with the awe he had felt when seeing his trust vault for the first time. In front of him were large mounds of coins, most of them having a golden tinge.

But it wasn’t everything.

In front of him were also several items of furniture, some being laden with miscellaneous items. A rack held several swords, a few desks held stacks of papers, and a large bookcase was half-full with books. There even was a plate armour standing as if guarding the treasure. On wobbling legs, Harry entered the vault, and stopped right in front of a painting. In front of him, looking right at him, were the still images of his parents. They weren’t moving like the ones he had seen at Hogwarts, but were painted with such detail that he could swear that they would wake up at one moment and address him.

After a few minutes of gawking, tears threatening to fall, he shook himself and went to investigate his other possessions. The first deck he saw was almost crumbling under paperwork, and the few words he read made him think that these were stock reports and other business information. As he was watching in awe, another few sheets appeared, neatly setting themselves on the appropriate stacks. Visibly, Griphook was working on his case already. He couldn't understand everything from them, and decided that he would visit the goblin again in the near future.

Switching to the weapon rack, he inspected the six swords hanging there, of which two were rapiers, two were regular swords, and the last two were very long swords, obviously needing both his hands to hands to wield. Apart from one of the swords, they were all neatly engraved with several patterns and figures.

He passed the slashing weapons and continued his tour. The body armour was ornate as well, with a coat-of-arms embossed on the breast plate. The crest was repeated on the shield which was resting afoot the armour. Near the set, he found four trunks, one of which he recognized immediately. That trunk had been in his personal vault when he had visited it the year before. Digging into it, he found the same stack of weird items. Thinking about it, he decided to come back later to have a more thorough look at it, and headed toward the bookcase.

The shelves weren't full of books, but the bookcase was quite large. He quickly parsed the book titles, some of them interesting, but, not wanting to read them right there, he left them where they were. Looking around, he noticed wardrobe beside the bookcase. Opening it, he was surprised to see several robes and other garments. Touching them, he was even more surprised to find that some were of the finest silk while a few others seemed really heavy. Two of those felt like leather whereas two others seemed to have a chain mail woven into it. It left him wondering about the purpose of these, but he didn't take time to inspect them more.

He took a last glance around and left the vault. He was sure, now. He would come back later.

Leaving Gringotts a few minutes later, he headed first toward the shop where a single and dusty wand was lying on display. Ollivander's activity was quite low at the moment, as most of the old shopkeeper's work was in the last weeks of August due to the arrival of Hogwarts students. The shop was empty, and the small chime resounded in it for a few seconds before the wheezy voice came from the back.

"I'm there. I'm right there."

Seeing Harry, with the physical aspect of Gabriel, Ollivander inquired "How may I be of service, young man?"

Harry hesitated. Would he play fairly and tell his real name? Or would he buy a wand as Gabriel Swift? In the former case, the Ministry would soon know about his 'resurrection', and he didn't quite want that. On the other hand, he wasn't really Gabriel, was he? Thinking about that, he imagined buying a wand under both identities, and the prospect of having two wands was quite appealing. Deciding to come back another day as his own self, he held his identification paper out, and asked "I'd like a wand, please."

Ollivander had first looked at him, but when Harry had been reflecting about the wands, the old man had turned around to stack his wand boxes neatly. Hearing the request, he turned again, smiling.

"Sure. You're at the right shop. No better in Great Britain! No other, in fact."

"I guess so. I just came from France, and my wand had been destroyed in a Death Eater attack there. My mother sent me to her family and they told me to go to Hogwarts. I need a new wand, then." The lie had come naturally, and Ollivander turned around, picking a few boxes and the automatic arm measurement tape. While the tape worked around Harry's shoulder and arm, the shopkeeper opened the boxes and put them on the counter. When the tape finished, he took some boxes out of his selection and added others, before gesturing toward his selection with a smile.

“There you are.”

Harry started with the first, and made the usual gesture. The wand emitted a few sparks, but the old man didn't seem to be satisfied and snatched it out. The second yielded nothing. The third vibrated angrily as soon as it was touched and Harry dropped it in fright. The fourth...

...the 59th wasn't good either, and both the boy and the old man were starting to get tired. Fetching another selection from the back of his store, Ollivander muttered pensively.

“Strange, most strange. There are really few wizards who are so special that only a few wands are usable. If I may...”

“Yes?”

“What was your old wand made of?”

“Let me remember...”

“You don't know it by heart?”

“Well... sorry.”

Ollivander sighed. “What do they learn in France nowadays?”

Harry didn't answer that question, as he felt it was a rhetoric one. Instead, he remembered his first wand. “It was... holly... eleven inches.”

“The core?”

“A phoenix feather. Yes, that's it, a phoenix tail feather.”

Ollivander looked at him pensively, and withdrew most of the selection on the countertop, some of these Harry hadn't tested yet. He then went to the front of the store, muttering about difficult wizards. He locked the door, and motioned Harry to follow him to the back.

Harry was awed to see the workshop of the wand maker, and held his hand respectfully on the containers where refined wand cores were held. His hand got slapped away and the old man looked at him with a frown.

“Never touch cores or approach them without the proper garb. They had to be isolated from magic to be usable as wand cores.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t know. We don’t have that kind of course in... in my school.”

Ollivander sighed. “Yes, I know. Beauxbatons dropped the course following a shortage of teachers more than a century ago. Nor in Hogwarts, son, nor in Hogwarts.”

Harry looked at the old man, curious about his melancholia. “Where could someone learn about it?”

“Why? Who would want to learn? There are old men who make perfectly working wands!”

Harry looked at his feet, ashamed at the old man’s outburst. However, something the man said made him look back up.

“Sir? Sorry to ask you this, but... don’t you want to retire, some day? You could travel, visit places...”

Ollivander stopped his movements, and visibly tensed. Harry instantly felt as if he had made a mistake. If the old man threw him out, he was going to have problems getting a new wand. Ollivander, however, looked at him with something like... hope? in his eyes.

“You know, lad, you are the first to actually enquire about that. I wondered when someone would ask the question, and... but I’m babbling, and you don’t want to hear it.”

“No, actually. I’m curious. I don’t know how wands are made and I would like to know.”

“There is no course to know about this, sonny. The ministries regulated wands centuries ago, and Britain’s suppressed wand making courses from all schools around 150 years ago. You see, the problem is that, legally, only someone with a mark of Outstanding in wand making can establish a shop, but, as there is no course in that anymore, no one can actually set up a shop of this. I’m the last one in Britain, and I’m beginning to tire about it. I’m also too old to push the Ministry to revoke that stupid law. If you want...”

The old man looked at Harry expectantly for several seconds. The boy, unnerved, started to twitch, before asking “Yes?”

“Do you want to be my apprentice?”

Harry was flabbergasted. He had never thought about his future in the magical world, and here was the first serious hint about a viable one. Mouth agape, he reflected about this for a while, and the prospect started to please him immensely. Looking at the old man with determination in his eyes, and his mouth properly set again, he nodded.

“I’d like to, sir.”

“Well! I don’t know about your schedule, but you could help me during the summer.” He looked through the window with a faraway look in his eyes. “There is always more work during the summer.”

Several minutes passed, before Harry interrupted the old man’s reverie. “Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Errm... about my wand?”

Ollivander smiled. A true smile, full of mirth. Harry felt trapped. Nervously, he asked “Sir?”

“You will do it yourself. You will make your own wand.”  
Diagon Alley...

After the shock of Ollivander's words and the few minutes needed to accept it, Harry went to Tracheus' to buy himself a trunk. Entering the shop through a steep flight of stairs, he was surprised to find a very proper shop. It just didn't have an outside display, he reflected, but if they were successful enough as it was, there was no need of it.

He was browsing through the shop's numerous items, when a good-looking witch came to him.

"What can I help you with, young man?"

Harry was surprised. Nobody had called him that way yet. Still, it was invigorating, and he smiled.

"I'm interested with a trunk..."

She looked around. "As the items displayed here imply, you are at the right place."

A male voice came from the back. "Nee! Stop annoying the customer."

She turned around, and, pouting, replied "He's not annoyed, dad!" Looking back at Harry, she made a show to ask, batting her eyes. "You're not annoyed, are you?"

Harry was taken aback. Either this girl was flirting with him, or she was very easy-going. Reflecting about his age, he concluded that it was the latter. His quick wit made him utter a very clever reply.

"Errr..."

She turned to her father again. "See? He's not." she said, before winking to him.

It took a few seconds for Harry to bring his mind to a proper state again. He shook himself mentally. "I saw a bit of your products-"

She smirked at this, and he fought to maintain his blush under controllable condition.

“Errr... I’m Gabriel Swift, and-”

“Harmony Tracheus. Nice to meet you, but it would be nicer if you call me Nee. All my friends do.”

The open smile made him stutter again before he could align two words coherently. “Perhaps Griphook sent you an owl? He’s a manager at Gringotts, and he told me you made very good trunks.”

She looked confused, but her father had heard the exchange, and came around. “Ah you are the young lad dear Griphook met this morning? He told us that you would step by. Jonathan Tracheus, current owner of Tracheus’ Trunks.”

Harry shook the proffered hand, mumbling his false name again.

“I wonder when Griphook will step by himself. It has been quite a time since he was in the magical purse department there. Is he still implying that we have a long queue of customers waiting?”

Seeing the nonplussed look on Harry’s face, he laughed. “Well... that is if you want a custom-made trunk. If you find what you want in the selection here, it’s immediate delivery!” His eyes were twinkling, and Harry found these two people very sympathetic.

“ So,” the man continued, “what will it be? Custom-made or takeaway?”

“Err... I don’t know, yet. Can I have a look at the selection first?”

“Of course. As you are our only customer at the moment, I give you Nee to give you anything you want.”

Harry stuttered at the surely involuntary innuendo. Or was it? Father and daughter’s eyes were glinting with amusement.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. And, Gabriel?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t mind Nee’s manners. I know she can be a handful. I made her to be.”

Chuckling, he left the pair and returned to the back where sounds of woodworking could soon be heard. Harmony looked at him with her usual, open smile.

He shook himself, remembering the aim of his visit. She saw at his posture that he was ready and, still smiling, adopted a more professional stance herself.

“I’d like a lightweight trunk with the possibility to reduce its bulk.”

“There are some here.”

The next half hour was spent with her describing the several functions of the trunks. He finally decided to buy two trunks, one for himself and one for Ginny. He remembered the state of her trunk from his previous nightly visit, and she could really do with an improved one.

He settled on two mahogany trunks, both with the reduction feature, enabling their owner to carry the trunk in their pocket. Those trunks came with a gravity feature preventing the content to move around when the trunk itself was carried. For a small price, he also added a security feature where only the trunk owner would be able to open it. As he wanted to store many things from his vault, he also asked, for his trunk, if the same model was available with an enlarged interior.

During this, the shop assistant had helped him, presenting the items, and demonstrating the features. When he asked for the enlarged model, though, she stared at him with a calculating look.

“What?”

“We have that model, yes, but we don’t have anymore trunks with just what you asked.”

She guided him towards another mahogany trunk, looking very much like the others.

“This trunk has everything you asked, but with more options to it. It had been designed as a demonstration item, a few years back, and it isn’t on par anymore with the numerous options that we could add to a trunk now. Nowadays, we can make trunks you can live in, with kitchen, bathroom, and even Floo access. We can make trunks with specific conditions like self-cleaning water tank or without gravity inside. Some other functions allow you to chat with a semi-intelligent trunk, or have it as a pet.”

Harry was looking at her, awed and impressed at the possibilities. She wasn’t finished yet, though, and continued her tirade. “These are features that can only be ordered, though. This one trunk, on top of being shrinkable and having its inside enlarged to one hundred cubic feet, has a built-in non-detection field, as well as a thought link. And two parts.”

“Well... what does that mean? What do these do?”

“The non-detection field prevents the things inside to be detected by usual means. It is doubled with a lead layer, which functions in the same way as against Legilimency.” Seeing Harry’s confused look, she explained more. “Legilimency is the art of entering someone’s mind, and it is blocked with lead. Didn’t you know?”

“I’m sorry; we don’t have that course where I come from.”

“Oh. And where do you come from?”

Remembering his previous lie, and wanting to be consistent should the shop owners chat with each other, he replied “France.” Also

recalling the name Ollivander had given, he added. “Beauxbatons School.”

“Ah? Nice country, as I have heard.”

“Thank you. It really is beautiful.” That was pure invention but, as people were generally proud of their own country, he had figured he could expand his story a little.

“Anyways, back to the trunk. See the lid?”

She pointed to the trunk’s cover, and Harry looked at it with his eyes wide, as there were no hinges on the supposed ‘back’ side, only another lock.

She quickly explained. “You can open it from one side or the other, and it will open to two different spaces. That way, you can sort your stuff.”

He nodded, and she went on with her explanation.

“Finally, the thought link allows the user to immediately find what he wants. When opening the trunk, you only have to concentrate on the item you want, and it will be positioned on top of everything.”

“Wow!”

“Yes. I have one of those myself, and it is really useful.”

“Okay then, I’ll take it. Do you happen to have another one available?”

“No, sorry, it had been one of a kind already.”

“No problem. I’ll take it with the other one, more ‘regular.’”

“Are you sure? I didn’t give you the price yet.”

“I’m quite sure about it. How much do they cost, anyway?”

“The regular one costs 500 galleons plus the security spell which amounts to 50 galleons. The other one... dad wrote that price tag at 2500 galleons, but I’m sure that he’ll be able to reduce it.” She looked at him with her usual devious glint in the eyes. “Besides, you’ve been nice. I’ll ask-”

“No! There is no need. You’ve been kind to me too,” he said, blushing, “and I want to pay the proper price.”

Seeing that she was going to retort, he interrupted her. “If you don’t want it for the trunk, take it for yourself.” Catching her surprised expression, he smiled. “As a present, if you wish.”

Her eyes went wide, before she launched herself at his neck. “Thank you!”

He tried to disengage himself, but froze when he noticed that her dad was eyeing them critically. Stuttering, he tried to explain. “I’m sorry, sir, but-”

“No need, lad. I know her. I gather that you either bought the whole shop or invited her out?”

Harry blushed again. This time his whole face had a nice tint of red. He coughed several time, still trying to push the girl gently. “I... neither, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? What for?”

“I didn’t buy the whole shop, only these two trunks,” he said, indicating the two trunks under the widening eyes of the owner, “and I didn’t invite her out, even if she’s as charming as one can be short of being an angel.”

She cooed, and, still attached to his neck, pressed herself closer to him. His body was starting to react, and he had to stop that soon or

he would be thoroughly embarrassed. Gathering all his willpower to ignore her, he spoke again.

“But... I’m already with one.”

They both looked at him in confusion. Profiting from it, he extracted himself from the arms of the girl, and explained. Kind of.

“See, I bought two trunks.”

“And?”

“Two.”

The man seemed to understand, and a somewhat sad look came upon his eyes. His daughter, however, hadn’t grasped it, so Harry had to explain some more. He didn’t want to hurt her burgeoning feelings, though, and decided to go easy.

“You are beautiful, easy-going, and I guess that, if I wasn’t seeing someone already, I’d have invited you out.”

“You... you are seeing somebody?”

“Well... yes.”

She sighed, mumbling something. Her dad bent towards her. “What did you say, Nee?”

“I don’t have any luck! For once, I meet someone fun, he’s already taken.” She wasn’t whining nor crying, but it clearly appeared that she was sad about it.

“We can stay friends, though.” Harry, not really used to interaction with people, tried to ease it.

Her gaze shifted toward him, seeping to appraise something. “Really?”

“Yes. What do you think of that?”

She sighed again. “Okay.” She sniffed. “Thank you, for being honest...” she smirked, “and fun to tease.”

He blushed. Again. “Oh. Thank you, too.”

The man chuckled. “Well. It’s settled, then.” He looked at Harry pointedly. “Were you serious for the trunks?”

“Yes, sir. And,” he added, seeing that the man was having the same afterthoughts as his daughter, “I don’t want a price reduction. Consider it my contribution to your wonderful shop and your wonderful daughter.”

She lunged at him again, and hugged him. “Thank you.”

“Well,” Jonathan said, “if everything is said and done, I guess that it’s time to check the trunks out, Nee.”

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“He wants the security feature.”

“Oh, okay. I guess that I have some work to do, then. Which one?”

Harry looked at him in confusion. Thinking that he asked about which trunk, he answered “The two of them.”

The man looked at him, before laughing heartily. To Harry’s nonplussed gaze, he explained that there were several security measure, the lowest being a palm of voice recognition, and there were also features that prevented the trunk to be moved at all.

Harry thought that the palm recognition was enough, and he told him so.

“Do you want your name on it, too?”

“Well, if it’s shrinkable, I guess that it’s not necessary since I will always have it in my pocket.”

Jonathan looked at him with the same calculating look that his daughter had given him earlier. “You know, since you insisted on paying the price, I can give you something else in return. No,” he raised his hand, seeing that Harry was going to refuse, “it’s a gift. It will be a bag. You will choose the model with Nee, and the bag will be linked to your trunk and the thought link will be usable through it.”

“Err... thank you, but I don’t understand what it does exactly.”

“It means that, wherever your trunk is, you can concentrate on the item you want and it will appear in the bag. Everything that you will put in it will be sent to your trunk. And... you’ll be the only one to be able to do that, of course. To anyone else, the bag will be empty since they won’t be keyed to the trunk.”

“Oh, okay. I mean... thank you, sir. Really! That will be very interesting.”

“Go now, shoo! Go select your bag while I secure your trunks and I check you out. I guess that you want the special one for yourself?” At Harry’s nod, he explained more. “I’ll put your friend’s trunk inside it, then. Remember that the first person to touch it afterwards will be the designated owner.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you for everything.”

Harry chose a black school bag, and went to pay for everything. Since his purse only held 50 galleons, he thought that he had to upend it quite a few times, and regretted not taking the charmed parchment option. However, being the owner of a shop selling somewhat expensive items, Jonathan had got that option himself. After signing the magicked parchment, officially relieving his account of the rounded sum of 3000 Galleons, he thanked them liberally and

left the shop with two shrunk trunks, one inside the other, and a kiss on each cheek from Nee.

His face was still red when he entered the next shop fifteen minutes later.

When Harry entered Quality Quidditch Supplies, his blush receded under comfortable condition, and he browsed for the many brooms and Quidditch-related equipment. Nobody was there, and he could gawk all he wanted on the broom that was displayed in the shop's main showcase.

The Firebolt was a new broom, which had been created the previous summer by some unknown business. The label displayed impressive properties, putting it on the top of the line. Seeing this, Harry almost drooled, remembering the exhilaration he had felt when flying. However, even looking around the case, he didn't find a price. On top of that, contrarily to the other broom displayed in the shop, there was only one of its kind in the cabinet. Inquiring about that to the middle-aged shopkeeper, he learnt about the story of that broom, and was stunned, as well as a little sad.

The company that had created the broom, founded by two friends, had made several prototypes of it, but they couldn't find a way to produce it en masse. The market crumbled, and their financial backers came to reclaim their money. One of the two owners, drowned with problems, had committed suicide at the beginning of the year, and the other was now unemployed, and was supposed to live in muggle London. There had been very few copies of the broom and, being all prototypes, several of them had malfunctions which earned their users wounds or even death in two cases. Now, it was rumoured to be haunted and, despite having many teenagers gawking at its performance, nobody bought it.

Having finished his story, the man left Harry to sell broom polish and keeper gloves to a portly woman, and Harry tuned them out, still looking at the Firebolt.

Speed, exhilaration, flight...

Danger, wounds, death...

The two lines of thoughts were battling in his head. Logic pushed him to reject the broom and find another, but he really wanted to zoom in the air like before. He reflected that he had already tasted death, and that he always had his ring to bring him back to his healing bed. Slowly, the first line of thought took the lead, and he turned around to catch the nearby shopkeeper's attention.

"Sir? How much is it?"

"Well, I'm not sure that you could afford it by yourself, young man."

Harry smiled. "In fact, I think I might." Decided to shock the man, he asked "It isn't worth more than a million Galleons, right?" He didn't know how much he owned exactly, but he was convinced that the large mounds of gold in his vault would be enough to allow the purchase.

The man was quite shocked, and shook himself after several seconds. "Of course not. It has been set at 20000 Galleons. The price of a small house."

Harry was ready to pay that price, but a glint in the man's eye stopped him in the middle of a nod. He reflected about his previous purchase, and decided that, even if he owned much, he could try to negotiate a little. At least, it would give him experience for future deals.

He looked the man in the eye and gathered the most business-like voice he could muster. "I take it immediately if you lower the price to 12000." It was a big difference but, looking at the man, he felt that it could pass. He added "No wrapping, no reporting about where I bought it, no hassle, and you can reclaim this showcase for normal business." He was feeling very Slytherin, and was briefly reminded of his chat with the infamous hat during his Sorting.

The man was looking at him with a calculating stance, and Harry tried to look as impressive and debonair as he could. A difficult mix, but

they were soon interrupted by a family entering the shop, with kids wanting to touch everything. The man was clearly annoyed at this, but smiled to Harry and extended his hand. "Agreed. Deal?"

Harry quickly reflected that he didn't need another broom, as he knew Ginny had one already. Arthur Weasley's new position and salary had helped furnishing the large family with the needed equipment, and each of the kids now owned a brand new Nimbus 2000. "Deal." They shook hands, and went around the counter, Harry once again signing on a magicked parchment to transfer the quite large sum from his vault to another. The man then opened the glass cabined and let him grasp the fabled broom.

As soon as Harry touched it, the broom hummed and jumped out of its display cushion. The man then removed the information tag, closed the glass cabinet, and went to help the family. Harry could feel that his new broom was 'feeling' restless, and silently promised his new purchase to fly around soon.

He didn't want to enlarge his trunk in this environment, but also didn't want to be seen exiting the shop with that broom. He sighed internally. In fact, refusing the paper wrapping wasn't such a good idea. However, he still had his charmed schoolbag. Perhaps he could put the broom in his trunk through it?

He opened his schoolbag on the floor and pushed the broom into it little by little. He didn't want to have an accident right now. To his surprise, the broom entered completely in his bag! Reflecting about Tracheus Trunks owners, he remembered that they had shared several knowing looks, and suspected that the schoolbag was more than just a link to his trunk.

Harry zipped his bag up and opened it right afterwards. No broom. He closed his bag again, concentrated on his broom, and opened it again. The broom was there, and he smiled. The next school year was promising to be interesting. He headed toward the shop's exit, looking around, when a yell behind him attracted his attention.

“Mum! Muuum! Look at the sords!” One of the kids was calling the mother from a hidden corner of the shop, and she quickly fetched the wayward child.

“I said it already, Kev. Don’t touch the swords.”

“But I don’t touched them, mum!”

“It’s “didn’t”, and you’re way too young to browse in that section.”

The pair continued their way, but Harry stood where he was. So, there was a section with swords? Interested, he slowly walked toward said section, and his eyes opened wide. Each time he had been here in the past, he had never thought that the shop had a section totally unrelated to Quidditch. He had arrived in a triangle-shaped room, with swords held in racks on the right, and strange objects on the left. Books also littered the walls between other items. Starting on the right, he found fencing sword, ornate ones obviously meant for decoration, oriental sabres... without having a too extensive selection, the wall was covered with swords up to the ceiling. An overly large sword, visibly meant for a giant to use with both hands, was hanging there.

“Interested?”

The voice made Harry jump. The owner had finished selling the family a set of underage brooms, and had silently arrived behind him. Taking Harry’s silence for an assent, he told stories of some of the blades, going up and finishing with the 10-foot long blade hanging above them.

“...and this one belonged to a giant named Damocles. Legend has it that he was killed by his own blade, but no one knows how.”

Harry, during the speech, had tuned the man out, and was browsing the books resting in the few shelves on the swords’ wall. Interested, he had grasped one on exotic blade handling, and another on fighting with several swords. The man’s eyebrows had risen at the choice, but he had continued his monologue.

Harry turned toward the man. "I never knew you had a room here."

"It's quite normal. The owner before me didn't want to specialize in that wonderful sport that Quidditch is, and I had to redecorate the whole shop after he reluctantly sold it to me. However, a few people, sticking to old traditions, still come here once or twice a year, to get material in relation with swords or fencing, so I left a wall with these." He approached Harry and whispered conspiratorially in his ear despite the shop being desert. "I haven't finished selling the previous owner's stock."

Harry looked at the man in wonder, before glancing at the room again. "And the other wall?" he asked.

"This... these books and items are related to muggle sports. Some muggleborns, as well as some eccentric wizards, want to have everything in the same shop and they asked several times to have a selection of material in relation to those sports. Foolsball, headball, you name it."

Harry, even without a proper sport education, now knew a fair bit of muggle culture, and he almost burst in laughter at the man's distorted names. Not needing anything there, though, he browsed diagonally through the proffered stuff, and his gaze stopped on a rotating book display. There, stored right next muggle books on athletics, were books about wizarding sports.

"These..." started the shop keeper in an annoyed tone, "these are books on the "sports" which were practised in the magical world before the appearance of Quidditch. Some of them still exist today, but their audience had been lowered to the minimum." The man's smile was the last of many indications that he preferred Quidditch to everything else. His body language clearly stated that, if he had had the choice, he would have closed that section a long time ago.

Curious about the name, Harry took a booklet promoting "The Political Use of Henge Games" by Lars Zeltik, as well as another one, titled "Magical Sports in Which You Need Balls", written by Ima D.

Centplayer. He started to browse them but, feeling the man's annoyed glance on him, decided to check them out anyway. After all, he wasn't poor by a long shot. After paying them, he stowed his four new books in his schoolbag, thanked the owner, and left the shop.

Heading toward the bank again, his sight was caught by the sun reflecting on a display. As it wasn't from a shop he knew, he headed that way, and found himself in front of Gudrun's Goggles, an equipment shop for the visually impaired. He looked right and left and quickly saw why he hadn't seen the shop before: like the trunks shop, this one's entry was in a recess from another shop. He stood there, reflecting about the shop, about himself, and about his eyes.

On impulse, he entered the shop, and began to browse the miscellaneous items offered. The shopkeeper, a very old lady, looked at him and smiled benignly, before turning back to her knitting work. Visibly, there weren't many customers, and, visibly, that didn't upset her. Harry read several leaflets about glasses and magical eyes before deciding. He didn't want to appear changed, and wanted his enemies to think that he could be impaired by losing his glasses even if it wasn't true. Reflecting about that, he still didn't know how one of his eyes had been healed, but could only be thankful that at least one was functioning.

He also reflected about magical eyes. Most of these were plain lenses, but some were so heavily charmed that it was a mystery they didn't melt. Looking at the list of charms, he found several interesting ones. He wanted to be able to see properly when in his normal form, and was curious about how a magical eye would react to his numerous transformations. He approached the old lady.

"Good afternoon, Madam."

"Good afternoon, young sir."

She left her needles and approached him. To his surprise, the needles continued to knit without assistance. Seeing his expression, the woman chuckled. "These are charmed needles. They are quite

temperamental, though, and I have to direct them manually at least half of the time. You wanted something for your eyes?”

“Yes. First, I’d like a pair of glasses.”

“Alright. Which one?” she asked, her arms encompassing her selection.

Harry hadn’t thought about it, and he could only look at the wide choice of models. He decided that he would have the same glasses as before, round with a thick black trim. Trying several pairs, he also took another model, with rectangular lenses and an almost invisible trim. He smiled. These would be his regular glasses, and the round would be the back-up pair.

The old lady, seeing that he had finished trying glasses, abandoned her needles again, and went to him. “Good. You look smashing with these. The round ones are a bit old-fashioned, but they can be used as a back-up pair, even if we can charm them so that they won’t break or fall off your head.”

He looked up sharply. “You can?” he asked, before biting his tongue. Of course they could. His own glasses had been muggle-made, and weren’t even perfectly adapted to his eyesight, as the Dursleys had preferred buying second-hand glasses with the accompanying lenses.

The woman huffed, her professional pride hurt. “Of course we can! We are the best shop in visual help in the whole country. Even the undercover Aurors come here to get glasses to see through walls, and-” she stopped there, her hand on her mouth, conscious that she had told too much.

Harry looked up sharply. “See through walls? Now that’s interesting.” He thought about himself, and was curious, wondering if they were charms able to discern his real appearance. “Are there charms able to pierce through illusions and transfigured material?”

The woman looked around meekly. She had either told him too much, or not enough. Sighing, she answered. “There are charms to see

through illusions. But nothing can help seeing through transfiguration, as it is a reworking of the matter itself.”

Harry sighed internally. At least no one would see through his numerous forms. Knowing that he wanted a magical eye also, he decided to show his real face. He warned the woman beforehand, and brought back his scarred side. She gasped and tumbled back to her chair.

“Madam? Are you alright?”

She looked at him in wonder, before nodding. “I... I never thought I would see a metamorphmagus in my shop. Is... is this your real face?”

He frowned. “Yes. As you can see, I need a replacement eye.”

“You seemed to have two eyes when you entered.”

“Yes, but only one was functioning, unlike when...” he stuttered, conscious that he was on the verge of telling too much. “Unlike... err... what it shows.” he finished lamely.

She looked at him pointedly, and he felt that he had to steer the conversation away. “Now you know that I can modify my appearance, can you tell me if there are magical eyes able to blend in a changed face?”

The woman lost her suspicious look and seemed to think about it. “I think most of them will do. We can add charms so that it won’t fall, though.”

“Excellent! Can I have the see-through-illusions charm on the eye? And...” he looked at the parchment with the list of regular charms for magical eyes, “eagle sight, as well as night vision?”

She looked at him sharply. “I might get problems if the illusion part was to be known. Normally, it’s reserved for the law enforcement personnel. I guess that you’ll pester me until you have it?”

He nodded vigorously, and she sighed. "Can you swear, on your eyesight, that you won't tell about it to anyone?"

He shrugged, and swore. After the magic of the oath dissipated, she was still looking at him, unmoving.

"What?" he asked.

"Why do you need glasses? Your eyesight seems alright, and the magical eye will be perfect already."

"Well... I want some people to think that I still need them."

She smiled. "Nice. Then, they are going to be quite cheap, unlike your magical eye. Speaking of which, do you want it to look like your other eye, or something else? We can do on-demand designs, like snake eyes, but it needs more time."

"No, thanks. Like my other eye will do. Can you add unbreakable charms to the glasses? And... does the eye already have one?" he added quickly.

She looked at him. "Yes it does. You will need to come back in a few days, as the other charms need to stabilize. The glasses you can take away now."

"Okay."

"Just a warning: after putting the eye on, you'll be quite dizzy. You also won't be able to use any of the additional functions while the other eye is open. Otherwise, your brain may be overloaded from information and you would faint."

He smiled. Fainting was something he was beginning to know. He paid the 1500 Galleons with the charmed parchment again, in exchange of the glasses and a receipt for the magicked eye.

Once out of the shop, he glanced at his watch and decided that he had just the time to fetch a few items from his vault before heading back to Joan and Michael's place.

One after the other, he put the books which titles he could understand in his bag. He also took the pair of regular swords with their scabbards, as well as the shield, reflecting that he could train his off-hand strength by holding it while training the sword. He wasn't a proper swordsman, but he had found out that the little fencing he had done at school had been helpful for his physical development.

He then looked at each of the robes and couldn't imagine what they were used for. Guessing that they could be useful at one point, and wanting to have explanations, he took six of them with him: the two woven with chain mail, the two leathery, and two silken ones. The first of these was of a deep green fading into black on the sleeves and shoulders, and had abstract silvery linings. He thought he could use it when appearing as Harry Potter, as it was the same colour as his eye. The second robe was more in the dark red tinge, and he had taken it out because its red base with golden linings had made him think of Gryffindor's colours. However, upon close inspection, it wasn't quite the same colour.

It was more...

It was more like Ginny's hair colour.

He blushed, and put the robe in his bag before leaving the vault, the bank, and Diagon Alley.

To be continued in next chapter: Schedule and Mischief...

Now that the girls are settled,  
The story has been whittled.  
To discern what will happen,  
Leave a review with your pen.

## Chapter 31 – Schedule and Mischief

The following weeks were strange for Harry, as he was literally having a double life. He started his days with a breakfast with Joan and Michael, and Joan and him went to school with their friends. Concerning the reported suicide, the school officials had concluded on a bad prank. In a local television interview, they even said that nobody fell at all, and the classes' routine came back quickly.

Harry continued to show interest to the classes, and continued to spend time with his friends. However, his whole attitude seemed to have changed. He didn't seem to spend any time working on his lessons, which were still done for the next day. He was also conspiring more often with his friends about what prank to pull on whom. The jocks hadn't noticed that Harry and Tamara were still alive, and the two of them weren't reminding them about it yet, hiding each time they saw them.

Tamara could have had some insight about the fact that Harry didn't seem to work at all, but she didn't know that Harry actually didn't spend the night at the Freyrs' place. After school, Harry would go home with Joan and wait for Michael while speaking about things and doing some homework. He would eat with them, and then leave, portkeying for Ginny's bed before taking her to his Hideaway. The rare times she was in detention in the evening, she left a message on the bed, and they met the following morning or evening. They generally spent four to six hours in the remote rooms, speaking about their life in the elapsed year or doing their homework together. This way, Ginny was learning about muggles and Harry was keeping in touch with Hogwarts' education. During these times, they also cuddled gently. They didn't feel ready to actually sleep in the same bed, even if they came close a couple of times. One of these times was when he had offered her the new trunk, something which had led to a Weasley-patented bone-crushing hug. That night, they had fallen asleep cuddling in the bed, fully clothed.

As night after night passed by, they felt closer and closer, and there was no doubt in their mind that their love would be blossoming soon. There were confusing moments, like when she couldn't return homework because she forgot it in Harry's rooms, but both of them

found the whole arrangement comfortable. Strangely, their coming and going weren't detected by Hogwarts' wards. After a few days of doing so, they supposed that the castle wasn't reacting because he now recognized Harry as being himself. After portkeying to her bed again, they kissed each other goodbye and he went back to his hideaway to sleep there. The time difference meant that he then had a full 18-hours day to work on things.

And work he did.

He started by sorting his books, those which came from his grandmother's office and those which he had taken from his vault. One or two hours a night, he would study normal and magical animals' anatomy, transforming into a few of them. As a tribute to Hedwig, he first succeeded in getting the white owl form and, only two days later, transformed into a sleek black snake. He also spent a few dozen minutes a day training to transform himself into another human being. After the two shape-shifting training sessions, he read the Technomancy books and, night after night, became more and more proficient in it. The only time he got stuck was when he wanted to start experimenting about the new theories he was learning: he had to wait for the outside daytime to buy the necessary Muggle devices. The few hours he had to wait, though, were used to start reading another book, this one on alternative magical focuses. The book was mainly advocating the use of magically charged crystals to hold magical energy and to cast spells in the place of wands. The last chapter of that book was so interesting, though, that he forced himself awake, thus sleeping late, something that, even in his hideaway, made him arrive fifteen minutes late in his History class. He wasn't able to maintain his concentration on the teacher explaining the naval strategy of the admiral Nelson, though, as his readings turned in his head. Even the chapter title was enough to bring a tingle of anticipation in his spine. Wandless Spellcasting!

After a week into this schedule, Harry retrieved his new eyeball from the magical optometrist. To his surprise, the ball was smaller than a regular eyeball, and it was totally black. Asking about it, the woman smiled, and told him that, given that he was metamorphmagus, he could grow a fake cornea on top of it, and that way, he could change both his eyes' colour at the same time. He thanked the woman, and,

after putting his eye in place and changing his head several times to test it, he left for the outside world.

True to the woman's initial prediction, he felt dizziness and headaches for several hours. Thanks to his refuge, though, he could spend these hours quickly, and it didn't interfere with his outside activities. Afterwards, he spent a great deal of his time experimenting with the eye's features, zooming to people hundreds of yards away, and using his night vision to navigate in Hogwarts at night. Remembering about it, he also asked Ginny for the invisibility cloak, and checked that his eye was able to see through it. In his hideaway, he also verified that the magical eye wasn't too obvious on his face, and that it blended with any transformation he could think of. As he had guessed because of his initial transformation leading to a regrown eye, the animal transformations were replacing the eye by a normal one. It was still there, but ineffective until he transformed back into a human.

He then went to the Room of Requirements and added it to his ring. The room soon became the meeting point of his small group of friends. Harry had been clear to them, though, that he didn't want a teacher there. They spent a few evenings a week together, talking about their memories and current events. After the initial shock of having a sister, Harry and Megan exchanged family stories about themselves. Fred and George were fun to speak with, especially when he told them that he had to prank a few muggle bullies. He suspected that Hermione was making a report of the nightly sessions to the teachers, but it didn't disturb him as long as said teachers didn't intrude, as he wasn't ready to deal with Dumbledore or Snape, even if the latter had supposedly changed. Ron and Luna were there, but generally sitting next each other and not participating to the discussion, apart from a few comments. Ginny was... cuddling him the whole time, and the others didn't comment on it, even if Hermione raised her eyebrows a couple of times when Ginny didn't seem surprised with what Harry was telling. It looked as if she already knew everything he was telling them.

It was one of these evenings that, on the verge of leaving, he caught Luna's shifting eyes. She clearly wanted to tell him something privately and he nodded discreetly, noting which direction she took.

He then thanked everybody and told Ginny that he was going to meet her later. When everybody was gone, he followed Luna, and met her around the first corner. The girl had turned several portraits over, visibly needing privacy.

“What is it, Luna?”

“Do you still want me to train you?”

He immediately understood what it was about, and nodded. “I had a run-in with an el... one of them, and she convinced me to be taught by her father, a fire master, for a few days.”

She whistled at the news, before speaking again “Well, as I think that your schedule is quite full at the moment, I compiled a booklet of notes and instructions you can use. Now, perhaps that some of them will be useless... Are you fully occupied this summer?” she asked, with a devious glint in her eyes.

He blushed. “It depends on what you call ‘fully’.”

“Can you go everywhere with that ring of yours?”

He looked at her, startled, and she felt she had to elaborate.

“Ginny told me a little about it, but I guessed most of it. For instance, is it true that you have to go somewhere before being able to magically transport there?”

Still stunned at her insight, he nodded.

“Good. What I propose is that you go home with me, in whatever animal form you want. A discreet one, mind you. And then you’ll be able to mark the place and come back for actual training.”

He was surprised at the proposal, and could only nod dumbly, before finding his voice back. “Thank you, Luna. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

With this, she sauntered towards her common room, and Harry turned the portraits around again before returning to the Room of Requirements. No need to disappear in front of potential spies. That night, he discussed with Ginny about Luna's offer. He had already told her about him being a Magius, although in not so many words, and she agreed about it. They then scheduled their summer. No homework was accomplished that night.

On Saturdays, Harry was helping Ollivander, discovering about the trade at the same time. He first learnt the basics of wand making, and found about the few possible cores. And he already made quite a discovery that first day.

"You see, Gabriel," Ollivander was saying, "there are only few possible cores for wands. You have to select parts of intensely magical animals, but the process of extracting these parts is quite difficult, and several steps must be taken in the proper order. First, you have to secure the zone magically, as no external influence must reach the parts when you extract them. For the same reason, you have to wear specially treated gloves. The extraction itself must last less than a minute for each part, and the result must be put in containers treated in the same way as the gloves. You understand that collecting a dragon's heartstrings in that way is quite difficult."

Harry looked at the old man during his tirade, and an idea entered his mind. While continuing to reduce some recently-brought harpy claws in a fine powder, he asked "Sir, are all magical animals eligible? And how long can we wait before extracting the parts?"

"Almost any magical animal will do, but the more powerful the animal, the more powerful the wand. Some animals, however, can yield very temperamental wands. For instance, I'm practically unable to sell my dozen wands made with pegasi parts, unreliable as they are. As for your other question... the magic of the parts dissolves slowly in the air. If the dead animal lies in the open, the process is quicker. It's slower if it rests in a place already full of magic. It's also slower if the dead beast was powerful. So, you see, it mainly depends on the power of the animal. Was there a reason for you asking?"

Harry smiled. He wanted to please the old man, and innocently asked "What if I told you that I know of a powerful dead animal?"

Ollivander turned slowly toward Harry, his eyes alit. "Where? Which one?"

"I can't say where. It's a Basilisk, and-"

"A Basilisk..." interrupted Ollivander, eyes wide.

"A sixty feet long one, dead for a year."

Ollivander's mouth opened wide at this, and he looked at his apprentice with a shocked expression, before sitting down with a thump. His hands taken by his current grinding work, Harry could only talk to him.

"Sir? Mister Ollivander? Are you alright?"

After several seconds during which Harry considered dropping his mortar and pestle, Ollivander looked at him in wonder.

"Is it... untouched?"

Harry considered it, and truthfully, he didn't know. But, if it was true that he was the only Parselmouth, nobody could have opened the Chamber of Secrets since then, and he nodded. Ollivander was hyperventilating, now.

"Sir?" asked a worried Harry.

"I'm..." the man coughed. "I'm fine, Gabriel."

"What about it?"

"What about it? Do you have any idea of the cost of the parts of a Basilisk of this size? It must have been centuries old. How do you know about it, anyway?"

Harry blushed. Even if he was beginning to like the old man, he wasn't ready to admit lying about him yet. "Well... I came across a few people talking about it, and they said that it was protected in... a magical house." At Ollivander's pointed look, Harry quickly added. "They don't want to approach it, but I think I could harvest a few parts from it."

Ollivander was looking at him with a calculating look in his eyes, before turning away, sighing. "I might be wrong in allowing you to do so, but Basilisk parts are rumoured to yield wands almost as powerful as ones made with dragons'. The fact is that we never got parts from old and powerful Dragons, only young ones who had accidents." His voice volume lessened. "I don't know why, but the old ones always seem to feel their death approaching, and leave to parts unknown." He chuckled. "Pun not intended."

Turning toward Harry, who had finished crushing the harpy claws and was now pouring the fine powder in a container, he looked at the teen's job intently while continuing his speech. "A Basilisk this size must be very old, perhaps 800 years or more. If it rested in a magical place, even for a year, I'm sure that it didn't lose much of its magic."

Harry was now finished and, after capping the magically-treated glass container and labelling it, he cleaned the gloves and addressed the old man again, grasping his quill and a roll of parchment. "Can you repeat the steps to gather the parts, and which parts to get, by the way?"

After verifying, in the teenager's eyes, that he was actually going to do what he implied, Ollivander explained to Harry how he was going to collect the Basilisk most magical organs.

Harry's Sunday mornings were spent on Hogwarts grounds with Ginny. They were fine spending time together but, despite the hideaway being clean and well furnished, it lacked an outside feeling. They first arrived in Ginny's bed, where Harry immediately transformed into his kitten form. They then left and searched for a calm and isolated place. With Harry able to change his physical appearance, they sometimes escaped to Hogsmeade with the older students. Some other times, they just walked hand in hand behind the

Quidditch pitch, unseen by the others. That gave Harry the idea to try his broom, once, and he used it several times to get himself acquainted to flying again, before taking Ginny with him.

Ginny thought she knew what flying was about, but the sheer sensations of flying at a much higher speed than usual while encircling Harry's waist was overpowering. She yelled in trepidation when the broom zoomed and stopped and turned around. That first time, Harry had to tell her that they weren't airborne anymore for her to actually release him.

The following Sunday morning, they wanted to use the Quidditch pitch for their isolated flights, but it was already full with the Hufflepuff team practising for the upcoming game. The two lovebirds looked at the pitch, then at the surrounding forest. They then looked at each other with the same mischievous look in their eyes.

"Do you think-" started Ginny.

"It will be dangerous-" said Harry at the same time.

They were silent for a few minutes, walking slowly toward Hagrid's hut.

Ginny spoke again, softly. "I went there one night. Actually, Ron sent me. The Forest was actually cool to me, not quite dangerous."

"Why would Ron send you in the Forbidden Forest at night?"

"He had known that the Potion Ingredient Outing was going to have a problem. I was in my lioness form and I prevented a large wolf from attacking them."

Harry looked up, worried. "You could have been wounded, or worse! What was he-?"

“He was fine, Harry, and I was, too. What I wanted to say is that the Forbidden Forest might be less dangerous to us if we go through it in our furry forms.”

“Wanna try?”

Mischievous eyes met devious ones.

“Let’s.”

Reaching the groundskeeper’s hut, they noticed it was empty, and made a show of knocking at the door, before discreetly turning around the building and heading straight into the forest. After several yards, the foreboding trees hid them from the outside, and they switched to their leonine forms, without wings for Harry.

“Why don’t you grow your wings?” came a gentle growl next to him, as Ginny, in her lioness form, addressed him.

“I don’t need them here, and they could be damaged by the trees, should I run through them.” he purred back.

She smiled in a lion way. “So, you think you’re up to a run in the forest?”

“Why not? On my mark, one, two, three!”

The two lions started to run in the forest, eliciting startled and frightened sounds from smaller animals, while the few centaurs witnessing them merely smiled at the easy-going way these felines ran together.

After a few hours, midday came around, and the teens came back to the castle, the beasts’ natural orientation sense kicking in. Harry left Ginny near the Great Hall, and went to a dark recess behind a witch statue, ready to portkey out.

...when he heard a discussion.

Two people were having an argument in shushed tones, and the toned down voices were those of male adults. Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore turned around the corner, followed by a silent and thoughtful Minerva McGonagall.

“...can’t reach him!” Snape was quite agitated. “He’s either taken as hostage, or dead. I don’t want to cast the spell again even to know that, though. It could release him if he’s alive. Jugson is our only spy, Albus, and I don’t want to go back there. Especially now that Vo... Voldemort is alive again.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore started, before looking around. Seeing the old man’s movement, Harry transformed into his kitten form. Several rumours existed about the Headmaster knowing everything, and he had seen the old man looking straight through his invisibility cloak once. With his recently acquired knowledge, he rapidly reflected that the old man’s spectacles might be charmed like his eye. As he was reflecting about that, the old man looked around, and caught sight of him. Frowning, he seemed to concentrate. Harry, a bit afraid that Dumbledore might start to cast a spell or two at him, started to move like a cat, licking his paw, and then strutting away. He distinctly saw the sigh of relief from the elderly wizard and caught his warning to the Potion Master not to speak about their current topic in the corridor again.

Harry was looking for another alcove to hide in order to change back in his human form, to leave Hogwarts, when he overheard another conversation. This time, the two persons involved weren’t speaking in hushed tones despite being in a classroom with a half-closed door. Thinking that he heard his name, he peered around the doorway.

And froze.

He didn’t have many pictures of his family and even less of his godparents, but he had seen Sirius Black’s face in several of the Daily Prophet copies that Luna had sent him what seemed to be a long time ago. He was speaking with another man who looked much older and more tired than him.

“...and I swear, Moony. If the old man doesn’t give me permission to see him this time, I’ll leave my job and the Order, and I’ll seek him by myself! It has been weeks since I showed him Harry’s letter, and he always thinks that it could be a trap from Voldemort. If...”

Sirius stopped speaking and sniffed the air. He turned slowly toward the door, and his eyes met Harry’s. He smiled deviously and pointed the furry black animal to Remus Lupin. “A cat! It has been some time since the last chase, don’t you think? Do you think McGonagall still hates me?”

Remus rolled his tired eyes and shook his head in defeat. Sirius was now in better shape than ever, and his mischievous nature was showing again. Remus couldn’t stop him and, to Harry’s utter surprise, Sirius Black transformed into a large black dog which started to chase him.

The two animals ran through the castle, the well-worn dog form never far behind the seldom-used cat one. During the chase, Harry used his shape-shifting knowledge to lengthen his body so as to have better chances of avoiding the dog, but it was everything he could do. Still, Sirius, while chasing it, wondered about the cat’s unnatural endurance.

At one point, Harry reached the opened doors of the Great Hall again and, thinking that the students would protect him from his rampaging godfather, he lunged into the large room. He didn’t have time to seek Ginny, because of the running dog on his heels, and he managed to evade it only by jumping on Hufflepuff table.

Sirius was launched, now, and his instincts had taken over. To Harry’s surprise, the massive dog followed him, and he pushed his cat form to run on the table length, jumping over plates and food. The dog wasn’t as supple, though, and his massive paws sprayed food in every direction, especially on the stunned and somewhat frightened students. While the two animals were running like crazy, several people started to laugh at the Hufflepuffs’ newly-decorated robes, and some of the targets took offence of it. Food started to fly in every direction, and there was soon a full-blown food fight in the Great Hall.

The commotion reached the running animals' ears, and they stopped running between Hufflepuff and Gryffindors tables to look at the surrounding mayhem. Several students, covered in gravy, were totally unrecognisable. Others had robes displaying the whole menu. Someone was having one of the dessert cakes splashed on his face and seemed to like it. Fred and George Weasley were having the time of their life, throwing rolls at everyone, housemates included. The dog rolled on himself looking like he was having a fit, but the teachers knew it was Sirius, and suspected that he was laughing at the unplanned prank. The Headmistress looked at him sternly, her gaze promising hell, before trying to address the chaotic crowd. The cat was totally forgotten, but was having the same reaction than the dog, as Harry was rolling on the floor laughing. His small frame was noticed by the Potion Master, though, and, after staring at the cat in wonder for several seconds, Snape went to Dumbledore and spoke a few words in the old man's ear. The man lost his amused twinkle when he saw what was there.

Unbeknownst to Harry, Dumbledore recognized him as the cat that was hidden behind a statue earlier, and the old man also recognized a very human reaction from the animal. After all, few cats would roll on the floor, seeming to have a fit when a whole dining room erupted in a food fight. These two observations made him realize that the cat must be an animagus, as his charmed glasses would have seen through it if it had been any other illusion spell.

These observations made the old man stand and grasp his wand, before walking around the staff table, heading towards the cat. He fully wanted to cast the Revertio Animus spell on the cat, but couldn't aim properly with all the flying food.

However, Ginny Weasley had seen the mad animals rushing in the room, and she had recognized Harry at first glance. Using the food fight to hide her intervention from the teachers, she took the cat and threw it under the table, before smashing a cream pie on a Hufflepuff's face. Startled by the move, Harry woke from his fit, and noticed, through the benches, that Dumbledore was frowning, looking around with his wand raised. Harry looked around and, judging that he had enough space and no witness, transformed back into himself before portkeying to his hideaway. Once there, he definitely thought

that he could read the chapter on Thought Activation from the book on Transportation Devices, to be able to transport while in an animal form.

In the Great Hall, the fight was coming to a close because of the lack of ammunition. After several minutes of yelling despite several food items flying by, the Headmistress finally succeeded in restoring a bit of calmness. She dismissed everybody, suggesting that the showers be used abundantly. That last comment was the closure and everyone filed out of the room while discussing of the happening in a good-natured way.

Good-natured wasn't the quality of the look McGonagall threw to the dog form of Sirius, who, after looking around, wondering about the cat, had the grace to whimper, his tail between his legs. He wasn't the only one to wonder about the cat, though, as Dumbledore was looking around too. Once all students had left the room, Sirius transformed back into himself, to find himself on the receiving end of one of McGonagall's infamous wraths.

However, she could only utter two sentences before being cut by Dumbledore addressing the cowering man.

"Did you catch his scent?"

Everybody looked at the old man in wonder. Only Snape, remembering the human reactions of the cat, understood the underlying meaning, and he took a bit of pleasure to rub the mutt's nose in it.

"The cat was an animagus, Black."

"I know." answered a surprised Sirius.

"You know?" asked Dumbledore and Snape at the same time, while McGonagall was trying to recover the direction of the conversation.

"Well... not at the beginning of the chase, no. Only when I left my instincts rule did I catch a more human-like whiff coming from the

cat.” He looked at Dumbledore. “But I got his scent, and I’ll find him, should he present himself again.”

“I want to know who can infiltrate this castle, Sirius. Minerva, I guess that your punishment for him was going to have him relieved of his teaching position?”

McGonagall could only look at the old man in wonder. She wasn’t going to go that far, but he continued, ignoring her lack of reaction. “Whatever. Sirius, I suggest you drop it and spend some time in your dog form to chase the cat. I don’t want Death Eaters spying around in animal forms.”

The old man had changed since the castle attack, and everyone could feel the energy behind his last sentence. Sirius nodded and left the room. There was no use in searching a scent in a room scarred from the meal fight.

Harry recovered from the food fight, and returned to the muggle world. Like every Sunday afternoon, he was going to spend time with his muggle friends. From what they had discussed during the week, they would be planning the revenge on the jocks today, and his presence was needed.

He arrived in his bedroom and found the house empty. Normal, he thought, as Michael was at the fair, and Joan was probably with Jason. They were to meet at Jason’s anyway, but Harry had felt better now that the boy had climbed over his timid self to ask her out. Jason’s collected appearance had always hidden his shyness but, now that he was happier, he was opening up.

He phoned there and asked Jason if the coast was clear. On his affirmative answer, meaning that only friends were in the attic, he portkeyed there. He then spent the remaining hours of the day with them, planning the next week’s prank.

It was the week of the prom. That Friday, class were cancelled to allow the upperclassmen to prepare the ball which was scheduled the same evening. Harry had warned Ginny, as he wanted to borrow her wand for the prank. However, she was as incensed as him at the

jocks, and she wanted to be there. In that way, she could participate, and take a shot at them herself. She also admitted wanting to meet his muggle friends. After several discussions, Harry agreed, and they all met in a street near the school on that Friday evening.

Harry had warned his friends about Ginny's presence, but it didn't prevent them from openly staring at her.

"What?" she asked, making a show of looking down at herself. "Am I underdressed or what?"

The comment broke the ice, and she was soon surrounded by the girls while the boys congratulated Harry on the cuteness of his girlfriend. That went for a few minutes only, as they had work to do.

"Where are they?" asked Harry.

"Inside." answered Kevin. "They dug themselves a place around the beer keg and act their joyous selves to anyone approaching."

"Tam," called Harry, "ready for the next scene?"

She nodded, and Harry removed the folded Invisibility Cloak from his school bag. Both teenagers had dressed up for the occasion, so that they could enter the building discreetly. Harry had also used his shape-shifting abilities to grow an inch or three so that he would appear older. Before they left, Ginny gave him a kiss on the cheek, and he blushed.

The little group trudged around the school, Tamara and Harry heading inside the building while the other four went to the designated place. While waiting for the outcome, Ginny and Joan would spend some time discussing privately about Harry, and Joan would then definitely understand that Harry was out of her league, bringing a kind of closure on his leave.

Inside the building, the music blared everywhere. There were two separate ballrooms, one which had been installed in the sport hall, and in which modern music resounded. The other one had been set

in the exam room, and a band was playing rock 'n' roll tunes. Some independent people had also brought their own music boxes and the cacophony in the corridors was quite unnerving. Tamara and Harry passed the entrance control easily, and went to an empty classroom upstairs to shed the cloak away. They then straightened their dance clothes, and headed for the sports hall where they knew their targets were waiting.

Despite the modern music, Tam and Harry made a show of waltzing around the beer keg. Several persons whistled, and one even tried to push them around, but Harry sent a little electricity on the place he was touched and the intruder recoiled, holding his hand in surprise. All this attracted the jocks' attention, and Harry and Tam quickly saw that they had been spotted. Playing the innocent couple, they left the room and made a show of climbing the stairs. The five jocks followed them on unsteady legs, not quite sure about the couple's reality. For them, these two persons had been pushed over the railing and were dead. After their crime, they had left the school for a few days, which went almost unnoticed, as the classes had been interrupted. Then, they had spent each evening drinking themselves into unconsciousness, and failing class after class. Their continually smashed state hadn't allowed them to notice the elusive group of "freakish" teens before.

They were now following the couple in the stairs leading to the roof, and were beginning to be apprehensive. Still, due to the beer and the testosterone, none of them could admit that to the others, and they finally arrived in a deserted roof. Hidden from their eyes under the Invisibility Cloak, Tamara waited until they were all on the roof before slamming the door from inside the stairway, locking it swiftly.

They startled at the sound, and went to the door, trying to push it open to no avail. Harry was then to make his presence known.

A ghostly voice floated toward the panicked jocks. They whirled around and froze.

The sun was barely setting, and the glowing star was just behind a humanoid form in front of them. Narrowing their eyes and shadowing

them against the sun, they noticed that the humanoid form had wings. They were moving, too, adding to the angel figure's reality.

“Do you know that victims of murders are given the right to go down on Earth to exact revenge on their killers?”

The sentence was clearly formulated and, despite their smashed state, they understood it perfectly. They began to whine and whimper.

Harry smirked. “I could do so much. Fry your bones. Boil your brain. Wilt your limbs.” He approached, his wings still moving slightly. In a hushed tone, he asked “What do you choose?”

Startled, they looked up at him, and saw that sparks were dancing around his hands. They crawled away from him, until they felt the railing behind them. Harry had pushed them exactly where Tamara and he had been thrown from the roof. He smiled, and nodded to their general direction.

“If you want a painless death, though, you know what to do.” He intensified his elemental output, and electricity began to crackle audibly, several small bolts coming and going around him. Frightened, the five jocks looked around and understood his meaning. They jumped over the railing at the same time.

The fall was short, but it was long at the same time. The five bullied bullies had just the time to release some of their internal muscles before landing.

On a soft surface.

On a soft surface?

Unbeknownst to them, Harry had warned Ginny about the imminent arrival, and she had cast several cushioning charms on the landing area. The four teenagers had hidden around the area immediately afterwards, leaving room for Harry's finale. The self-appointed angel jumped as well and, aided with his wings and the cushioning charm, he landed upright in front of the heap of soiled jocks.

“I suggest you tell everything to the police. Next time, the ground won’t be that soft.”

As if on cue, the nearby Ginny muttered a Finite Incantatem to end the cushioning charm, and Harry portkeyed on the roof. Right afterwards, Kevin opened the building’s nearest doors and several older students could witness the jocks in their ugly display. White pants don’t fare well with faeces.

Retracting his wings, Harry approached Tamara who was looking over the railing, a wide smile on her face. Although she wanted to keep it, she knew that she couldn’t, and returned his Invisibility Cloak. Grasping her hand, he portkeyed back in the street, where the four other teenagers were already waiting.

A salve of cheers met them and they blushed, before taking leave of each other, Harry portkeying with Ginny in his hideaway for a deserved night of rest.

The next day, Harry went to his usual apprenticeship with Ollivander, but only for a few minutes, the time for him to gather the necessary tools to collect the Basilisk parts. He then left for Hogwarts and strolled towards the Chamber of Secrets entrance in his dog form. Still uneasy about the Chamber, Ginny had declined coming with him, and he soon found himself in front of the snake-decorated washbasins. He uttered the word to open the way, and, just as he jumped in the revealed hole, spoke the closing word. Thanks to his ring, he wasn’t to come back by this way, and didn’t want to the entrance to stay open either.

The stench in the lower levels was almost unbearable. There still was the collapsed ceiling, and the open door with other snakes on it. And the Basilisk body was still where it fell, the decomposition having merely started attacking its thick hide. Thinking about that, Harry reflected that the skin itself could be used, in the same way the dragon hide was.

Drawing the wand Ollivander had lent him for the work, Harry’s first intent was to cast a Bubblehead spell to avoid the stench.

Unfortunately, Ollivander had been direct in his instructions. No magic was to approach the body while he extracted the parts. Sighing, and immediately wriggling his nose at the smell, he cast the magic repellent spell around the corpse. It felt the magic surrounding the room fight with the spell, but pushed himself to his limits to finish the casting.

The first and foremost parts were the eyes and fangs. Unfortunately, although it had saved his life, the eyes had been pierced by Fawkes during the fight. One of the fangs had also been damaged because it had struck him in the arm. Smiling at the irony of the situation, he grasped the remaining teeth and, using prying tools, removed them from the mouth of the beast, before storing them in the same container. After capping it and storing it in his charmed schoolbag, he extracted another container, and started on the beast's brain. And understood the difficulties of a professional wand maker. Or rather, of the people extracting the parts, as it wasn't always the same persons.

The brain was glutinous, the smell was bringing Harry on the verge of retching. Because of the deadly wound, most of it had oozed out of the skull and started decaying. Harry couldn't collect most of it, but still gathered half a dozen pints of the grey substance. Closing the container's lid, he extracted another one and worked on the creature's heart. The massive organ was to be extracted in one go for Ollivander to be able to extract the proper heartstrings from it. Remembering Ollivander's lecture about snake anatomy, he opened the skin with several knives, cursing about the lack of magic. A few levitation spells, cutting curses, and Accio, and it would have been all. All for naught though because it would have damaged the potential cores.

Now used to the stench, Harry sighed, and plunged his glove-covered arms into the rotting creature's body.

And he got a surprise.

There wasn't a heart waiting for him. Due to unknown reason, perhaps due to its age, the Basilisk was gifted with no less than three hearts, positioned along its spine. Thanking his lucky star, Harry began to fetch them, three times using the knives to cut the organs

around the precious muscle, and storing the three of them in the waiting container. Now that the body was cut open, he then went for the next useful organ and, removing the rotten parts, harvested around a hundred pounds of liver.

He stepped back to look at the gigantic beast with awe, and his previous thoughts about its hide came back. Using the sharp tools, he cut large slabs of the skin, which he rolled and stored in the initially empty second compartment of his trunk. Once the trunk was full, two hours afterwards, Harry was covered in stinking goo, but only one quarter of the creature's hide was removed.

He shrunk his trunk again, thankful that the containers provided by Ollivander were insulating their content from the magical shrinking. Otherwise...

After adding the Chamber of Secrets to his ring, Harry left for his hideaway, to take a well-deserved shower. After a long scrubbing session, he finally emerged, ready to work. Entering Ollivander's shop, he immediately went to the back room, and began removing the containers from his school bag. When his boss emerged from his private quarters, a napkin around his collar, Harry noticed that it was midday, and his stomach grumbled. Blushing, he designated the containers on the work table.

"There. The eyes and a fang were damaged. Three poisonous fangs and ten regular ones." He smirked at the understatement. Teeth that were longer than a foot were anything but regular. He wriggled his nose when showing the next containers. "A few pints of brain and a hundred pounds of liver." He then smiled widely, showing the next one. "And three hearts."

Ollivander stumbled back and sat heavily on a chair. "Three hearts! How is it even possible?"

Having read several muggle books on wildlife, Harry tried to extrapolate from there. "Perhaps, when the Basilisk ages, he mutates and grows another one, to be more resistant."

“Yes. Perhaps. Anyway, I don’t think I’ll be able to pay for all this.”

“You don’t have to pay for it, sir. I’m perfectly happy to provide it for free. You already give me the best course in wand making.”

“True, true. But I can’t accept that. It’s... it’s too much.”

“What if I ask to make my own wand from these?”

“I’d agree at once, if the cores react well to you. But it’s not even sufficient. Don’t worry, Gabriel, I’ll find a way to repay you.”

Harry couldn’t argue anymore, and he went for his next scheduled question. “Sir? There is also the question of the hide.”

“The... hide?”

“Yes, sir. I reflected that the creature’s hide could be used to make protection garb, like dragon hide. Do you know if it’s possible, and do you know of someone who would be able to do that?”

Ollivander, who had risen to have a better look at the containers, sat down again. “Who... who are you, Gabriel?”

Harry smiled apologetically, and stood there, waiting. Ollivander breathed deeply a few times, before speaking again. “There is Madam Malkin’s, but the only dragon hide items she sells are accessories like gloves, boots, and belts. I know of another shop, but it only sells to Law Enforcement personnel. I know about it because I’m tied with the same oath. You see, every wizard and witch has only one wand. It helps the ministry to track magic. It poses problem if someone loses his or her wand during a duel, though. That’s why Aurors and several other Ministry personnel have the right to get a second wand. The same people also have the possibility to buy protective gear from that shop.”

He reflected silently for several seconds, before speaking again. “I guess that, since you work with me, and you provide the matter, you can buy stuff from there.”

“I don’t really want to buy stuff from there.” replied Harry. “However, if it’s possible, I’d like to learn their trade so that I can do something with the bits of hide I have. If that’s not possible, I will sell the skin to them, but I really want to do something personal with it.”

Ollivander fell into silence for a minute. He then stood up, and went to write a few words on a parchment. Sealing it, he gave it to Harry. “This paper should tell them my high consideration for your work. No, it’s true!” he added, seeing that Harry was going to deny it. “In a few days’ worth of work, you learnt the relation between the arm measurements and the wand length, the method to attune cores to woods, and the proper way to gather cores from a dead creature. If my eyes don’t deceive me, these containers hold very proper cores. Your next steps will be to sculpt the wood, choose a wood and core combination for people, learn a few spells needed in the trade, and then, actually make a wand. From that point, you’ll only learn by experience.”

Harry was stunned. “Does that... does that mean that I could open a shop now?”

Ollivander smiled. “Not now, but if I had my word, you would be able in a few weeks’ time. I just hope you don’t, though: I’m not quite ready to deal with a challenger at this point in time. I’d rather use your help for the summer rush.” He smirked at that, before turning serious again. “Besides, to open a shop, you will need the proper exam. However...” He looked at Harry thoughtfully. “I might register myself at the Ministry as wand making examiner. I didn’t do it before, because the job was enough in itself, but I’ll do it so that you can open your own shop later.” Remembering Gabriel’s identification papers and the according age, he added “Next year, you’ll be of age. I could help you in setting shop, and, after a few more years, I might retire.”

Hearing all this, Harry felt more and more shocked. He was so astounded by the man’s ideas that he could only nod weakly, to Ollivander’s amusement.

The old man waited for Harry to recover, before speaking again. "The shop I told you about is right next to us. In fact, the second-hand robe shop is a cover, and their back office is a real shop, selling protective garb akin to dragon hide battle robes and the like. Do you want to go there now or will you help me refining the core you just brought?"

"Well, I'd like to go there as soon as possible, but I also want to learn how to refine these cores. May I help you with one of each, perhaps do one myself before leaving?"

"Let's do this, then."

They spent the next hour and a half refining the new cores. Ollivander first showed Harry how to extract the heartstrings from one of the hearts and Harry followed with another one. The brain was quick to treat, as it only needed to be mixed with a few reagents. The teeth weren't difficult to manage, except that they had to be careful not to touch the powdered venom fangs, as it was still dangerous. While finishing powdering one of these fangs, Harry idly reflected that, if he could use body parts from magical creatures, he could pluck a few feathers from his own golden griffin wings to be used in wands. These thoughts stopped short when he remembered his ancestor's book's notice about it: no magical power was acquired when he changed form, only physical. However, he was magical himself, wasn't he?

"Sir?"

"Gabriel?"

"I was reflecting about magical cores and a stray thought occurred to me... has anyone tried to use regular animal parts in wands? Or... humans'? I was also thinking about the animagi."

Ollivander stopped crushing his fang and looked at him strangely. After a few seconds, he resumed using his pestle. With a faraway look, he began to explain. "You see, Gabriel, since the beginning of wands, wizards and witch have always used magical beasts, as the regular animals don't yield any power. However, in history, there have

been a few attempts to bind human parts or even spirit to objects. The few who tried to use human parts as wand cores have lost eyes or fingers in the subsequent explosion. It seems that human parts are more volatile than any other creature. Some 700 years ago, a law was passed to forbid such experimentation. That's why you'd better not mention it around Ministry officials, especially during your exam. Concerning the animagus part, I can't say anything. I guess that it would either yield the same explosive results as the humans, or nothing because the animagus only have a regular animal form."

Harry smiled internally at his mentor's last sentence. If he only knew! However, he didn't want to make himself explode, so he stored the idea in the 'dangerous memories' zone of his mind. After thanking Ollivander for everything, he headed for the second-hand robes shop, his letter in hand.

The shop's entrance was exactly what its name implied. Mounds of robes in every colour, shape, or size, were haphazardly thrown on tables. Some of them were even stained or torn in places. A few poorly-clad witches were browsing through the selection, and a middle-age woman was sitting behind a countertop, reading a wizarding magazine. Harry didn't see anyone else, and his envelope was labelled to "The shop owner" so he gave it to the woman.

She looked at it, turning it over and over, as if trying to decide if Ollivander's seal was a genuine one. She then rose, looking at Harry with a raised eyebrow and, after giving his envelope back, motioned him to follow her. She led him in a back office with even higher mounds of second-hand clothes and put her hand on a bare wall panel. A door appeared in the wall, and she ushered Harry through it. No words had been exchanged, and Harry felt that it was better that way. He advanced in a poorly lit corridor, and entered a large room.

It was as if he had entered another shop, as Ollivander had told him. There were dozens of wardrobes showing many robes, vests, pants, boots... any and all article of clothing, each of them having a different style and protection purpose. He didn't have time to browse them, though, as a portly man in his fifties walked across the room toward him with an angry expression.

“You’re not allowed in here!” he bellowed. “I don’t know how you went through, but-”

He was interrupted by the teenager holding the letter in front of him. Harry was quite certain that, if he didn’t have the letter, he would have been properly Obliviated and thrown outside. As it was, the man looked at the envelope suspiciously, but opened and read it nonetheless. His angry look transformed into a surprised expression, then into a happy one. His booming voice resounded in the otherwise deserted room.

“Sneaky bastard!”

Harry was quite stunned. “I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Ollivander sent you to me, fully knowing that I was needing help preparing robes for the next Auror class. You want to work for me, lad?”

“Err... yes, sir. I’m Gabriel Swift, sir.”

“Good! And don’t call me that! I’m Pierce Armsteel. Call me Pier, like everybody. What is your schedule?”

Harry thought about it for a moment. His muggle education wasn’t finished yet, but this year didn’t yield end-of-year exams, so he judged it safe to skip most of the days. Besides, he had to learn the trade quickly to be able to work the heavy skin he had harvested. Still, he wanted to keep in touch with his friends, and judged that mornings will be fine. “I’m free on the afternoon, sir. I mean,” he corrected, noticing the man’s glare, “Pier.”

“Excellent! You’ll start tomorrow at 2pm. Let me take your handprint for the entrance, and I’ll take you for a visit. Have you sewed before?”

“No, s... Pier.”

“It’s no bother. You’ll learn quickly. The most difficult part lies in mixing the magic and the sewing process. You’ll start with supple

leathers and simple protection spells, and we'll work up from there. Here, press your hand on this sheet."

Harry complied, and the shape of his hand stayed on the charmed parchment. True to his word, the man then took him on a tour of the shop. He described the different clothes, spells, and material. He took him to the back of the store, where two young witches were working already. One of them didn't even look up from her work but the other met his eyes for a moment, distrust showing.

Despite this, Harry was glad to find himself something else to do. He borrowed two books from the office, to "learn about the trade", and, thanking the man, returned to Diagon Alley. Ollivander had freed the remaining of his afternoon, so he left Diagon Alley for his hideaway. There, he read the books from Armsteel's shelves. The first one was rather thin, and showed basic sewing techniques. The second one, more interesting right now, was about the conservation techniques for creatures' skin. After reading it thoroughly, he got the Basilisk skin out of his trunk and laid it in his sports room. Using his plate to conjure a large amount of salt, he sprayed them with it. Then, after using the tissue preservation spell described in the book, he enlarged one of his cauldrons and filled it with water. In the water, he diluted a strong organic acid bought from the apothecary and bathed the skin in it. During the whole process, the toxic fumes from the cauldron were recycled by the hideaway's constant air freshening.

After a few days, Harry was the happy owner of large slabs of very thick and resistant leather, but was still undecided about what to do with them. During that time, he bought another trunk with an enlarged inside, and was dragged by Harmony to a lunch at the Leaky Cauldron.

The new trunk's inside was huge, approximately the size of Hogwarts' Great Hall, but that model of trunk wasn't shrinkable. It was long and thin, though, and could stand on its side and adhere to a wall, and then acted like a door. Harry then harvested the remaining Basilisk parts, and kept the raw skins and the treated slabs of Basilisk leather in that trunk, so that his refuge wouldn't be clobbered with them. Meanwhile, at St Mungo Hospital for the magically wounded...

Severus Snape entered the wizarding hospital, and went to the nurse managing the visitors.

“Good day to you. Is there someone called O'Donnell in here?”

The young nurse looked at him in wonder. Like most people her age coming from Hogwarts, she had been taught Potion by Severus Snape. His greeting, then, was so unusual, clashing with her memories, that she could only look at him in wonder.

The man sighed, and, bending over the counter, grasped the heavy register and opened it, while she still looked at him in wonder. The register was magically updated, and had been created at the same time as the hospital, fifty-or-so years ago. Turning its pages quickly, Severus Snape directly started to read the details of who entered St Mungo ten years ago and before.

Reading the register, he found several entries with the O'Donnell name, but it was small cases only, like a broken bone or a mistake in imbibed potions. During fifteen minutes, he scrutinized the book, quite forgotten by the people around him. Only those who also wanted to get information about ill people waited for him to finish his search. When he found what he wanted, he memorized the information and left the counter.

Jack O'Donnell had arrived in St Mungo almost twelve years ago, after a splinch. A patrolling Auror had found him in a muggle neighbourhood, and since then, he was in the same room, among other people with the same problem. The room of the long-term mental infirmity, on the fifth floor. The Potion Master quickly went up, and, finding said room, opened its door.

He got quite a shock upon discovering the room's occupants. Most of them were lying in their bed, not moving, and a magical light near each of them was an indicator of the person's health. Not being a Healer himself, Snape didn't understand about the light. However, looking at the persons' names on the beds, he quickly found Jack O'Donnell.

And his insight had been correct, as the man had visibly suffered from a severe splinching accident. Normally, people could still live quite normally after such accidents. At least, they could live by themselves. However, seeing his state, the man couldn't live by himself. Judging by the bricks still attached to his skull, he seemed to have splinched himself in a wall, head first.

Snape sighed, before raising his wand. The outcome of the spell he was about to launch could be quite empty, because of its target's new mental structure.

“Legilimens.”

The landscape was quite empty. The only thing that was visible in the man's mind was a stone wall hurling itself to the viewer's eye, again and again. Snape sighed, before drawing back from his spell. O'Donnell's mind wasn't going to help him in the least.

Looking at the prone body lying in front of him, Hogwarts' Potion Master reflected about his options. He could go back to Dumbledore and be done with it. However, to ease his self-inflicted debt of bad treatment of the Potter family, he felt he had to continue. The only new thing he had learnt about the man was that he was alive, that he effectively had a splinching accident with a stone wall, and that he had been discovered by an Auror.

An Auror!

Every little thing Aurors did while on duty was cause for a report, he knew. He left the room, heading to the Apparition point of the wizarding hospital, and, remembering the date of O'Donnell's admission, Apparated to the Ministry.

Once there, after passing the required checkpoints under the suspicious gaze of the numerous employees, Severus Snape arrived in the Auror Headquarters lobby. He knew that he wouldn't be helped if he asked something for himself, though, and he asked for his colleague Alastor Moody to the receptionist.

The old Auror was there, and welcomed him in his unofficial office, before offering him a glass of his favourite beverage, and a chair. Thanking him, the Potion Master twirled the glass in his fingers, trying to sum the problem up.

“I need access to a patrol report from several years ago. Halloween 1981 exactly.” He swallowed a bit of his glass’ content, and noticed at that moment that the wizened Auror was quite restless. To anyone else, Alastor Moody would have been the same old grumpy guy, but Snape was able to read the minute eye movements and hand gestures. “Are you alright?”

“Yes I am!” Moody had been playing with a quill, drawing idly on his desk calendar. At Snape’s question, and to his surprised glance, he slammed the quill on the desk, staining the calendar. He then took a large intake of breath before talking again. “I’ll fetch it. You are not allowed in the Archives.”

Snape waited a few minutes for the other man’s return but, bored, he stood up to have a look at Moody’s room. Several dark detectors were lined on shelves on the wall. He chuckled at this. The wizened Auror was as paranoid as ever. Two comfortable chairs were facing the desk behind which a more Spartan seat was. Snape smiled at this proof of the Auror’s distaste of anything giving too much comfort. His eyes roamed on the desk’s surface and wondered about the ink spot. When had Moody started to react this way?

He turned the calendar around, and saw that, apart from the blotch, there had been several things written on the whole page. Several times the same words, the same sentence. And, judging by the Auror’s state, it couldn’t be a lie. His face lost all colour as he staggered backwards, stumbling in his seat. Grasping his glass, he downed the remaining quart in one go.

Moody entered his office at that time, still agitated. When he noticed the calendar’s turned position, he shot a pointed look at Snape’s unmoving shape and closed the door. The Potion Master had to verify the information and, still not moving, he addressed the old Auror.

“Is it true?”

Moody went behind his desk and took his calendar in his hand before slamming a large tome on his desk. Glancing at the calendar, and seeing the words that he had distractedly etched around the page, his eyebrows shot up and he swore loudly. He then threw the whole calendar in his chimney and aimed his wand at it.

“Incendio.”

Snape wasn't used to see him in that state, but that meant only one thing. Suddenly, his request about the patrol report felt useless and unimportant. He didn't have time to think about that, though, as he suddenly found himself with a wand trained on his forehead and the blank face of Moody behind it. Before he could react, the old Auror had spoken.

“Tell me why I shouldn't remove that information from your head.”

Snape looked at the man, mouth open. Moody was known for his paranoia, but that kind of information was important enough to be shared with responsible men like himself. After all, he prided himself to be a master Occlumens, and no one could get information from his mind. He looked Moody in the eye, and spoke softly.

“If it's true, I need to know about it, because my job involves him somewhat. If it's a secret, it's safe with me, as I've mastered my mind a long time ago.”

“I shall see. Legilimens!”

Snape wasn't ready for the assault, and it was with a pained expression that he made a round of his active mental wards. None had failed under Moody's attack and, after several minutes of pushing each other out of their minds, both men found themselves panting heavily in the small office.

Moody lowered his wand, and Snape interpreted his body language as expressing some regret of not having a reason to Obliviate him.

After all, it was the Auror who had made the error of writing the information first.

Moody sat back, sighed, and opened the large tome, speaking at the same time.

“Year 1981, more than 1500 reports.”

Seeing the other man’s surprise, he chuckled darkly. “That’s because someone made the last months of the year calmer than its beginning. The previous year topped the record with more than 2000 reports.”

Snape’s mind was still slowed by the earlier revelation and he didn’t make the connection immediately. Moody smirked and uttered only one word, on which the Potion Master scowled automatically.

“Potter.”

Snape nodded, though, still a little ashamed of his reaction.

“What do you want from there?” asked Moody, pointing to the book.

Snape then recounted Megan Prunner’s story of being Harry Potter’s sister, and the lead which took him to O’Donnell splinch. They browsed through the book, and found the information he had been looking for: the location of said accident.

After promising secrecy, Snape thanked the grizzled Auror and left. He had a track to follow, but he would go to Dumbledore later, with a lot of questions. The man he had seen the name of shouldn’t be alive. Hogwarts’ leaving feast, the Great Hall, a few days later...

“...and I do not want to leave you with a bad impression of our world. Even in the darkest hours, the light is still alive. I want us to raise our glass to our friends, fallen so that we may live in a proper world. To friends of the Light.”

The whole Hall repeated the toast and Dumbledore sat, imitated by everyone except the Headmistress. The Great Hall was set up for the feast, but two different banners adorned the walls instead of the usual one. The previous years, only the banner of the winning house was displayed around the whole room, and the students couldn't wait for an explanation about it. Some of them couldn't wait for the food to appear, too.

Coughing to reclaim the attention, the Headmistress continued the end of term notices. "This year, there have been great difficulties for each house. Therefore, and from now on, we will award two cups. There is already the Quidditch cup, which will be renamed Athletic Cup to include the other sports classes. This year, the Athletic Cup is awarded to Gryffindor, who, even by losing the last game of the season, had pooled enough points to top the other houses."

After the deafening cheer from Gryffindor, the Headmistress continued.

"We will now also have the Academic cup, which will reflect the academic achievements of the house. It will reflect the overall marks and punishments related to other classes. This year, the Academic Cup is awarded to Ravenclaw, who worked hard despite the circumstances."

The Ravenclaw table cheered, but several of them, as well as other clever students through the other houses, knew that something was missing.

"As some of you might guess, this system does not include points gained or lost outside class. These have been deemed unrelated to said Cups, but they will appear in the personal folder of each student..." She smiled, and added "starting next year."

The students, understanding that they had just been given reprieve of that year's bad attitude, cheered, while promising themselves to prevent their personal folder to gain undue weight. Starting next year.

In the room, there was a little someone cheering all along with the Gryffindors. A sparrow was set on Ginny Weasley's shoulder, sometimes nibbling gently on her ear.

At the end of the meal, though, the joyous atmosphere was disturbed by a still-bandaged Divination teacher. Professor Trelawney had been targeted by Pansy Parkinson's attack in the Great Hall, but had been still alive when found, although in critical condition. She had spent a whole month recovering in the Hospital Wing, always telling everyone that it had been her destiny. Now, though, she was walking toward the staff table in the now silent room, her eyes wide and unfocused. Around the middle of the hall, her head fell back and a deep voice, unlike her own, erupted from her throat.

"There has been heartfelt joy, there has been pure sadness.

There has been victory, and then thorough madness.

In every aspect of this outliving world,

The darkness receded, the light shone as it should.

Beware though! The season, which is not finished,

Will bring lots of sorrow, all of them unwished.

Light's true warrior will make a hard life-and-death choice

About his soul bonded. The darkness will rejoice,

And quench every one of the light source we know.

Only the bloodied man, his old master in tow,

Will discover it all, and will push on the light,

There will be a recess, and the warrior of light

Seek the souls of the dead, the old and new, he will

Find his eternal mate, again, and, free, he will  
Search the sea, the nature, the fir and the heaven  
Until he reaches those, who, playing in their den,  
Define the destiny of all of us. The theft  
Of their secrets will then harm both sides, what's left  
Will be an empty board, two pieces on each side.  
The ultimate contest has to wait for the tide.  
Once started, the battle, which we waited so long,  
Will be the only thing people will see along  
The fight will be lengthy, but after the battle,  
Only one man will stand, and the world will rattle.  
Nothing will be as such, as what we used to know,  
The question is: in which direction will it flow?"

Everybody had been silent since the beginning of the poem, but, the last verse uttered, the Divination teacher crumbled on the floor and every student started to comment on their old fraud of a teacher's new ranting. The staff levitated the fallen body back to the infirmary, before meeting in the Headmistress' office to discuss what obviously was another true prophecy from Sibyl Trelawney.

During the whole talk, Albus Dumbledore kept silent, thinking about another prophecy which was still in effect. He suddenly reflected that, if he had really taken care of Harry during his childhood, he wouldn't be in such difficulty now. Albus Dumbledore vowed that, the next time he would see Harry Potter in person, he would tell him everything. The following morning, the usual tango of the trunks was displayed, to some peoples' amusement. The amused ones were either

students who packed early, like Hermione, or teachers who spied at the agitation through the windows. Harry and Ginny didn't have that problem, though, as they had packed Ginny's stuff last night and Ginny was now having her shrunk trunk in her pocket. A few students noticed that the young Weasley wasn't pulling a trunk around, but they were occupied with their own, and didn't ask questions. Besides, the Weasley in question was very taken with commenting the surrounding agitation to her newfound cat.

That morning, Harry had transformed into a cat, once again. He always found that cats were a good form, but didn't want to show Dumbledore his black cat shape again so he had concentrated on a tabby one. As she didn't have a trunk, Ginny was one of the first in the train, still talking to her cat, and she was able to reserve a good compartment to talk to Harry while waiting for the little group.

A panting pair of twins arrived first.

"Oy, Gin-Gin! How did you manage-" started George.

Fred finished "-to arrive first? And... where is your trunk?"

She smiled. "Harry offered a new trunk to me."

"And where is it?"

She took the shrunk trunk from her pocket and showed it to their widening eyes, before pocketing it again. Ron and Luna arrived then in the compartment, closely followed by Hermione and Megan. The younger girl still didn't understand everything about Harry and the fact that she was his sister, but she was sticking with the older students' group most of the time nonetheless. Not that they minded, because she was as fun and quick-witted as the twins. The only free time she got without them was spent with Blaise Zabini. After the Ball, they had found each other's company entertaining, and spent a few hours a week together, talking about classes, houses, and other wizarding stuff.

Disregarding the fact that Ron and Luna probably knew about it already, Ginny was going to introduce the group to the new animal form of Harry, when the door opened and one of their teachers appeared.

“Due to the increase in dark activity, there are going to be teachers on board. Report to us whenever-”

Sirius Black stopped in mid-word, and sniffed the air suspiciously. His gaze went to the cat, and he frowned.

“Is this your cat, Miss Weasley?” he asked, pointing at the animal which was currently licking his front paws.

“Yes, sir.”

“Since when?”

Ginny looked at the cat affectionately, before answering “Since forever.”

For several seconds, Sirius stared at the cat, which was now sitting comfortably on Ginny’s lap, paws extended and a look of pure feline bliss on its face. Shaking his head, he finished his announce and left the compartment, wishing the students a good trip. He couldn’t transform into a dog in front of students, and, even if it was more efficient than the regular human’s, his sense of scent wasn’t as accurate in his human form as it was in his dog form.

The train started, and Ginny released the cat to sit next to her, before locking the door and closing the curtains.

“Is this your cat, really?” asked Fred.

“I never was it at ho-” started George, when the cat grew into a very smiling Harry Potter.

Ron and Luna, as predicted, were wearing large smiles, not fazed in the least by the boy’s appearance. Hermione was nodding, her mind

taking in the new information. Megan was gaping at her brother, before pouncing on him, hugging him. The twins recovered quickly.

“Blimey, Harry!”

“That sure is a useful gift!”

“Don’t you mind-”

“-teaching us?”

Harry patted Megan’s back. It hadn’t been a long time since their last meeting in the Room of Requirements, but he hadn’t demonstrated his shape-shifting talents yet. Nodding to the twins, he addressed the group.

“I won’t mind, guys, but I will have a pretty loaded summer. However, I think we can meet in a few days at the Leaky Cauldron, and have a blast around London, what do you think?”

Megan looked crestfallen. “My parents always take me on vacation.”

Hermione answered “I know mine will try too. I’ll certainly go with them this year... Last year had been terrible, and I promised to release the pressure a bit. I think they programmed a trip in Greece.”

Megan’s eyes were open wide. “Where in Greece? My parents want to go there too!”

“They didn’t tell me. I can ask them once we find them.” she was smiling.

“It would be so cool to go with you,” Megan was smiling, but looked at the older girl timidly, “that is... if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Harry was witnessing the exchange, and interjected “Hey! Don’t turn my sister into a bookworm, will you, Hermione?”

“And what wrong is it in being a bookworm, Harry?” countered Hermione.

The girl’s frown melted when she noticed the amused smile everyone was sporting. After a good-natured laugh, Harry stood.

“I’m sorry, there is a meeting that had been postponed for too long already. I have to see... I have to see my godfather.”

“Who is it?” blurted Megan.

Luna held her hand out and squeezed Harry’s “You’ll be fine, I know it.”

Ginny stood as well and hugged Harry, before sitting down again.

Just before unlocking the door, Harry turned toward his friends and said “I don’t think it would be wise to stroll the corridor with my own head. Ron, do you mind?”

Ignoring the others’ lack of understanding, Ron nodded, smiling. “As long as you don’t deteriorate my reputation, mate.”

“Don’t fret, I’ll do my best.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

They all laughed, before Harry concentrated, frowning. A dozen seconds later, a second Ron Weasley was standing in front of the gaping group. Harry pocketed his glasses and, turning toward his sister, said “My godfather is the teacher we just saw. Sirius Black.”

He then left the compartment, in search for said professor.

After five minutes of searching, he finally found Sirius in a compartment, playing some board game with another teacher. That second teacher was the one he had found with Sirius on the day of

the food fight. Noticing the student in the doorway, said teacher smiled at him. "Yes, Ron?"

Harry looked at Sirius. The man was manipulating pieces to build a three-dimensional structure but was failing miserably. He cleared his throat, trying to swallow the fear of rejection that was mounting. After all, even if Sirius Black had wanted to reply to his letters, he hadn't done so.

"I... Can I... speak with... Professor Black?"

"Of course, you can." answered Remus. "As soon as he removes his thoughts from the game." he added with a smirk.

A startled Sirius looked up, and appeared to discover that a student had entered the compartment. Upon noticing the student, though, his nose wrinkled and he looked at the false Ron intently. "What do you want?" he asked slowly.

"Can I talk to you alone?"

"Anything you tell me can be heard by my friend Moony over here. Didn't I tell you so at the beginning of the term?"

"Sorry. If you did, I forgot."

"Seriously, 'Professor Remus Lupin' and I are the closest friends on Earth." Ignoring Remus' slap on his arm due to his use of the official term, he spoke again. "Go ahead."

"Okay." Thanks to Luna's first update, Harry knew that Remus Lupin was one of his parents' friends as well as Sirius, and supposed that it was safe to tell him too. The boy who had the appearance of Ron turned around, locked the door and closed the curtains. He then drew a deep breath and faced the two men.

"What do you know about Harry Potter?"

“Well... I thought he was dead and I escaped Azkaban to... check on that. Only recently have I been informed that my godson was alive. You were there, too. Did you forget? In the Headmistress’ office?”

A strange expression passed on Harry’s face, but it was gone too quickly for the adults to fully register it.

“Do you want to see your godson?”

Sirius Black was flabbergasted at the question. If he wanted to see his godson? That had been his number one desire since he had received that letter. If only Dumbledore hadn’t ordered him not to answer...

Not understanding the open-mouthed expression and the subsequent frown, Harry’s shoulders slumped. “If you don’t want to, I’ll-”

“Hey! Stay there! I didn’t say I didn’t want to, I was thinking about... about a few things which had prevented me from going in search of him. I want to see him, actually.”

After a moment, Harry answered “Why?” The question was difficult for his godfather, but he had to ask it. Sirius’ answer came immediately, though.

“Why? Because I missed his childhood and, from what I have been told, it could have been better if I wasn’t stuck in prison.” Sirius lowered his head in shame, and Remus turned toward him, patting his shoulder. “Because I wanted to apologize for not being there to defend his parents, for not taking care of him when I was able, only seeking a petty and failed revenge, and for ignoring his messages.”

The two wizards weren’t looking at Harry at that moment, and the now crying teenager morphed back into himself, although without the scars. “Apology accepted.” he said.

Startled at the change in voice, the two wizards looked at Harry as if he was an apparition.

Sirius was the first to react. Reaching a tentative arm, he asked "Harry? Is that you?"

"It's me, Mr Black. It really is me."

Sirius snorted through the tears that were now streaking through his face. "Nobody ever called me that way. If you want to be a good godson, Harry, call me Sirius. Or better yet, Padfoot."

"Padfoot?" The name was stirring something in Harry's memory. A sheet of parchment. Four names. Turning toward Remus, he slowly uttered "...and Moony? You guys are the Marauders?"

Taking in the man's nod, he gaped, before being bowled over by his godfather, in a bone-crushing hug. "It has been so long, Harry!"

Remus brought his arms around the pair, and they spent the next several minutes in a group hug, before Sirius removed himself from the hug, looking at his godson suspiciously. He bent forward, sniffed guardedly, and exclaimed "That was you!"

Not quite understanding the context of the question, Harry looked at him in askance.

"The cat I chased, that was you!" Sirius elaborated. "Before the food fight..."

Harry smiled at the happy remembrance, and nodded.

Remus was staring at him, wide-eyed. "You're an animagus, Harry! Like father, like son!"

"My father was an animagus?" asked Harry, dumbfounded.

The two Marauders smiled at each other. "Yes he was." started Sirius.

"A deer, if I recall correctly."

"A pretty regal one too."

“That’s how we found his name.”

“Prongs.”

“And we used to call you Prongs Jr., or Prongslet, when you were a toddler.”

“He was so proud.”

“So was Lily.”

Harry was having difficulties following the emotionally charged banter between the two adults. He was learning more about his parents in this five-minute conversation than in his whole life.

“I remember a map,” he started, “and there were your names on it.” He frowned. “And there was a fourth. Worm’s tale or something.” At that point, Harry didn’t remember the exact content of the articles he got from Luna.

“Wormtail.” Sirius’ tone was cold and dark. His fists clenched involuntarily, before Remus’ hand on his shoulder relaxed him. “That traitor sold your parents to Voldemort and framed me. I spent twelve years in Azkaban because of him, and you spent the same amount of time with your despicable relatives.” Seeing Harry’s raised eyebrows, he explained. “Dumbledore told us about your... death, which one of his numerous tools reported him to be perpetrated by your relatives.” He snorted. “That’s the first time the old man actually told us something. I swear he loves swimming in half-truths. Speaking of which, did you send me three letters asking for a meeting?”

At Harry’s nod, he growled again. “Dumbledore told me that it wasn’t your exact writing, and that it could be a trap from Voldemort.”

“Sorry about the writing. I spent a rather chaotic year and it might have changed.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Thanks, pro... Remus.” answered Harry with a smirk. “I already have a personal counsel. Besides, I guess that someone gave you a reading of most of my life during this year.”

“How do you know?” asked Sirius. “Were you in the office at that time?”

“No, but I gave the written tale to Ginny for a reason.”

“Oh. Right.”

They spent half an hour talking, Harry extracting their promise that they wouldn't tell anyone about his special abilities. After that time, a knock was heard at the door, and Harry immediately turned his back to it, concentrating on Ron's face again. When Remus opened the door, a fourth-year Ravenclaw named Marietta Edgecombe entered the room and began to whine about a group of Slytherins stealing their food. With a raised eyebrow from Remus, indicating that it was time to work, while Sirius was displaying a frown, meaning that he had more questions to ask, the two professors left the compartment. Harry left it too, and returned to his first one.

There, Hermione and Megan were discussing about what they knew about Greece, while Ron and Luna were cuddling gently and the twins were chatting about pranks with Ginny. Upon Harry's entry, they closed the door again, and Harry told them about his chat with his godfather. He didn't tell them about their Marauders' history, though, wanting to use the knowledge to prank the Weasley twins.

After a rather uneventful ride, the seven students and one cat stayed together. They all greeted the Weasleys, before passing on the muggle side of the platform to meet Megan's parents as well as Hermione's. The two girls succeeded in scheduling a meeting between their parents to arrange a grouped trip in Greece. Afterwards, everybody agreed to meet at the Prunner's place on June 20th, and then each family left toward their own home. Before leaving the platform, though, Ginny hugged a certain tabby cat under the curious gaze of her mother, before relinquishing it to Luna's hands.

To be continued in next chapter: Thou Shalt Kiss And Learn...

The elusive wizard is  
Rather taken now, with ease.  
You laughed, too, with their pranks.  
Please review now, fill my tanks.

## Chapter 32 – Thou Shalt Kiss And Learn

To reach home, Luna took another train toward Cardiff, and found an empty compartment rather easily. Once the train left the station, Harry turned back into himself, and they spent the afternoon ride talking about their families. Harry learnt that Luna's mother was a muggle, and that she had been dead for several years, now. He also learnt that her father was directing the wizarding magazine *The Quibbler*. Speaking in depth with her, he came to realize that her dreamy attitude was a carefully designed appearance. She had certain weird comments, but the faraway looks and general forgetfulness were designed to keep people at bay. Harry wasn't a psychiatrist, but he could note that Luna had never coped well with her mother's disappearance.

Once the train pulled over at the station, he vowed to himself that he would respect Luna's confidence, and not talk about his findings to anyone. Well, except Ron, but he surely already knew.

When Harry saw her father, he instantly recognized the trademark way of dealing with things. If that was possible, Elijah Lovegood had taken his wife's death worse than Luna, and his journal had plunged with him in a placid folly. There were still buyers, but less than before. However, Luna had shown Harry the edition speaking about his death, and Mr Lovegood's recounting of the "events" hadn't been that far from the actual truth.

Of course, nobody had believed him.

Harry thanked him for his warm welcome, and helped Luna hauling her trunk in her room. There, Luna plopped on her bed.

"Here we are, Harry."

"Yes." he answered uncertainly. "Here we are. What do you want to do?"

"I think I should guide you half a day each week, and the rest of the time, you'll practise by yourself. If you have questions, you will ask

them in our meetings. Unless they're urgent, but you know how to owl, right?" she asked with a smile.

"Okay. We start now?"

"Yes. But before, you should add... well... this corner, there, to your set of destinations."

"Speaking about this, we could spend our time in the hideaway itself. Did I tell you about its properties regarding time?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, for each hour we'd spend there, only fifteen minutes would have passed here."

"Interesting... I guess we could make use of that. However... is it grounded in a way or another?"

"Well... I don't know."

"Try to find that information quickly, because without it, you can't really practise in it."

"Okay."

"However, we can go there today, as I don't think that you'll use much power in the first lessons."

He then walked to the previously indicated corner, and she looked at him curiously while he whispered the according words. Once the corner was registered as "house of crumple-horned snorkacks", he went back to her with an apologetic smile.

"I have to find unique names for each places, and ones I won't use in regular conversation, you know."

She shrugged. "Why wouldn't you use crumple-horned snorkacks in conversation? They are very important creatures for the ecology of the fjords, I'll have you know."

He looked at her for a moment, before remembering that a great deal of knowledge had been pressed unto her by her lunatic father. He sighed, before taking her hand and uttering the activation word for his hideaway.

After Luna's customary exploration of the place, he engaged the conversation on the proper track. "I read your book, but I couldn't practise what it said."

She smirked. Luna smirking was quite an unusual sight, and he felt... strange. "It's normal," she said, after having recovered her usual facial expression. "I didn't include the exercises." She lost her smile, and absentmindedly twirled her wand in her hair. "I need to be there, so that you wouldn't cause damage around you." Looking up, she added "Unless you own a grounded metal cube in which you can practise?"

At his shake of the head, she continued. "I thought so. Now, there are several fields we need to train you on. The first is elemental attack and defence. The second is improved senses. The third, and most difficult one, is elemental travel."

"Wow." was all what Harry could muster.

Luna wasn't finished, though. "The booklet I gave you merely repeated more formally the things I already told you, with explanations about the theory behind it. Each time we will progress, I'll give you another. Now, sit, and concentrate."

He did so, while she reclined in her bed, still keeping eye contact with him.

"The elemental attack can be done by touch, at a distance, or through material. It depends on your element. I know that, for Air, the

touch and distance attacks can suffocate someone. We can also use our utilities to levitate ourselves or others.”

“I’m sorry... your... utilities?”

She giggled. “I forgot, didn’t I?”

At his confused expression, she elaborated. “There are several powers which depend on the element. They are seldom used for anything else than utilitarian work, so they are called utilities. We Air elementals can gather air around us, allowing for underwater breathing, call forth a wind, or read minds, among other stuff. As it depends on the element, I don’t know about your utilities. Perhaps it’s a mix between Air and Fire, unless it’s something entirely new. In fact, most utilities are mastered once you learn elemental Vision. This way, you can see the flow of your element around you, and change it.”

Harry was barely following Luna, as an insidious little voice in his mind kept telling him that she was a loony. Something called for an explanation, though, and he interrupted her.

“Wait!” He thought about what she had just said, and asked “What does the mind have to do with Air?”

She took a deep breath, kept it for a second, and exhaled loudly. “I don’t know. All Air elementals have a slight control on people’s mind. Judging by my few experiments, it’s linked to the fact that unguarded thoughts flow in the air. I didn’t like the feeling, so, don’t worry, I won’t read your mind. There are other Air elementals, though, who are specialized in it. They are our Brigade of Secrecy.”

“What do they do?”

“They are like the Wizarding Ministry Obliviators. Whenever a stray elemental burst is felt, they erase the memories of the witnesses. You know, this power over the mind also reflects in the elemental political system. Most politicians are Air elementals. Not because they can read others’ thoughts, but because they are more able to hide them. Are you interested in this?”

Harry nodded. Tamara had told him vaguely about politics, once, but he had felt that it had been a sore topic. Luna being able to explain, he wanted to know.

She sat up, while continuing her speech. "Most elementals belong to the four elements. Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. Most elementals tend to share attributes with their elements, and it's the same in our politics. I could picture Earth elementals as athletic but slow, and they generally don't intervene in our political system. Water elementals are thorough in their actions but always changing opinions, which makes them difficult to follow at times. Fire elementals are easy-going but hot-tempered, and always challenge people around them. Air elementals are dreamy and focussed, and they hold most of the political power. Air is always challenged by Fire for the power and they tie fleeting alliances with Water, who themselves are strictly against Fire. Earth doesn't intervene. It's quite simple, in fact."

He looked at her pointedly. "The way you described them... these terms are opposites, Luna."

She smiled. "I know. Isn't it wonderful?" At his nonplussed look, she sighed. "Alright alright. Well... the opposites I spoke about are the two ends of the scale which is used by each element. It's a caricature, right? Anyways, it doesn't apply to you." She looked at him with a dreamy expression. "I never met a Lightning before. I wonder which scale applies. Air, Fire, both, or a whole new one?"

He looked uneasy, but his mind rebounded on something she said. "You said you never met a Lightning before, but... did you meet other... unusual elementals?"

"Well..." She blushed. "I said I didn't use my mind reading power... It's true, but... I used it to... feel others around me, especially at Hogwarts. Our rule of Secrecy forbids me to interact with them, though, and only when you repeatedly shocked people with Lightning was I forced to intervene."

"Wait a minute! You knew I was one? From the start?"

“Yes. And I just told you why I didn’t tell you before. Now, if you want more information, you have to swear on your powers that you won’t tell any Unoriented at all, and any Untrained without a good reason.”

“Untrained?”

“Those who don’t master their power. Like you were before. Now, do you swear or will I have to wipe your mind?” The sentence was uttered matter-of-factly, and Harry didn’t know if that was loony Luna or the serious one speaking.

“I... I swear. Who are the others?”

“The first I noticed was the blond Slytherin, you know? The one you constantly bickered with... The name’s Dragon, or something... He is a Cloud one.”

“Wait a minute! You mean to say that Malfoy... Draco Malfoy... is an elemental? A Magius?”

“Yes. And a mixed element, like you.”

“And...” Harry thought about it for several seconds, before looking up with a wide smile. “And that means he has to have at least an elemental in his family tree.”

“Obviously.”

“Elementals being seen as Muggles by wizards, that means he isn’t as pureblood as he wanted us to believe.”

“Probably.”

Harry stood up and started to pace excitedly. “When I’ll tell Ron, he’ll be-”

“Harry?” called Luna, effectively interrupting Harry’s pacing and ranting. “Your oath?”

He looked at her without seeming to understand, before realization dawned on him. He wasn’t to speak with Ron about it. “Oh. Okay, right.” he said, before slumping back on his chair.

“Besides,” she continued, “Drago-”

“Draco.”

“Whatever. Are you done correcting me?”

“Sorry.”

“Well, then. First, DraCO doesn’t know about it, and won’t suspect anything before either someone trains him or he releases power accidentally like you did.”

“Speaking of this, how did I do it?”

“Like accidental magic...” she started, before noticing Harry’s impressed look. “What?”

“You know very much.”

She snorted. “I’m a Ravenclaw, I’ll have you know.”

“True. Sorry. Go ahead.”

“Like accidental magic, accidental elemental surges are directed by emotions. When you met Ginny, that one time in the Great Hall, and Ron told me about the alleyway too, you were obviously happy. More than that. If I might, I’d say you were in love.”

Ignoring Harry’s blush, she continued. “From the very thin cloud of stray thoughts around his head, I gathered that Draco had been raised strictly. Even the few anger scenes I witnessed, most of them

directed against you, weren't completely genuine. In his case, it could be centuries before he releases an accidental surge." Noticing Harry's look, she amended "Well, figuratively speaking, of course. Like I thought Neville would do."

"Neville?"

"Yes. He's not shy anymore, is he?"

"Well, I didn't meet anyone apart our little group, so I don't really know."

"Well, he's not. Rumour has it that Snape healed his parents. After Voldemort's fall, twelve years ago, Death Eaters had subjected them to the Cruciatus for so long that they lost their mind. They woke up last summer."

"How do you know? Neville was my dorm mate and he never spoke about it."

"When it's the only thought gravitating around someone's head for a whole year, you can't prevent from picking it at one point. That's also why I acted gently with him during the trip back to London, last year."

Imagining the year he missed, Harry smirked. "If it's really Snape who healed them, Neville must have been quite angsty around him, no?"

"Actually, no. Ron told me that he thanked him during the first Defence period, embarrassing both of them to no end. Snape didn't take points and he even comforted him."

Harry looked at her with wide eyes. "I didn't know people had changed so much in a year. I always discover new things about... about everything." He stayed silent for a few seconds, before bringing the conversation back in its track. "So, what about Neville?"

"Neville is an Earth Magius. He hadn't been trained, but I guess that, with his parents around, he will come to it."

“No wonder about the element. He has always been good in Herbology.”

Thinking back about what Luna had told him, Harry wasn't quite happy about people being able to read his mind. “Are there ways to block someone, to prevent your mind from being read?”

“Yes, there are, and they work against all the mind-related attacks, whether elemental or magical.” she smiled. “The first one is to concentrate, but you can't concentrate all the time. You can also sort your thoughts before going to sleep, that'll help your subconscious to organize your mind, and that'll diminish the number of stray thoughts. Air elementals can build an Air bubble around their heads, impenetrable for thoughts in both ways. Or you can do it the wizards' way.”

He looked up. “The wizards' way?”

“Yes. Wizards have dabbled in the mind for a long time already. Ron told me about Lockhart, so you already know about a spell to modify people's memory. There are other spells, as well as meditation techniques, to invade one's mind or to protect oneself.”

“How... how do you know about that? Hermione has never talked about that, and she is always ahead in the curriculum.”

“I got every possible documentation about wizard things related to my element before going to Hogwarts. And it is not on the curriculum, you wouldn't think that Hogwarts would teach people to invade each other's minds? Or teach them ways to circumvent the Ministry spells and potions? After two years in Hogwarts, though, I was happy to have read all of this, because I saw several people probing and invading others' head.” She looked down suddenly and muttered “Nobody cared about mine, though.”

Harry, however, wasn't going to let that conversation fall. “Who? Who does that? I don't want to be... probed or invaded.”

She looked up, frowning in concentration. "I know there was Drag... Draco, during my first year. He was far, but I saw him use a spell on a first year Slytherin girl, and my elemental vision showed that he had completely overridden her thoughts processes."

"He obliviated her?"

"No. The Obliviate curse blanks parts of the memory. What he did was imposing his own will. I was too far to hear the incantation, though."

Harry reflected about what he knew, and his mind directed him toward the Unforgivables. He gasped. "He... he used the Imperius?"

She thought about it for a few seconds, before nodding. "You know? That could be possible."

"But... but... it's illegal! And Unforgivable! And... if he's not in the school anymore... is the girl still under his control?"

"I don't know. Apparently, judging from several press articles, he had isolated himself in his Manor and has even cut his Floo access."

"Did you see others? Other wizards probing others' mind?"

"Well, I shouldn't say this, but professor Snape did it a few times in the Potion class, during my first year. It mainly helped him to prevent accidents, I gather. He also does it in the Defence class, for the same goal it seems. And then there is professor Dumbledore."

"What about him?"

"I saw him discussing with people several times, and he was visibly reading their mind at the same time. Well... visibly for me."

Harry chuckled darkly. "I'd bet that the twinkling in his eyes is a way to draw people's attention so that he can read their minds more easily. Luna," he looked up, "this is the first thing I need to learn."

“I won’t be able to teach you Occlumency. I’m an Air elemental, so I don’t need it. Thus I didn’t learn it.”

“Occulmancy?”

“Occlumency. It’s the wizards’ way to build a shield around one’s mind. I can lend you a book about it, though. It explains the techniques, and we can use some of our time with me testing your progress.”

He smiled. “I’d like that. Thanks.”

Luna coughed, then continued her teaching. “As I can’t guide you very well despite your element having a part of mine, I’ll start with the elemental Vision. Once you master it, everything will be easier.”

They spent the few remaining hours before sunset with Luna introducing him to the theory and Harry concentrating hard. Unsuccessfully. Yet.

Afterwards, he brought her back home, thanked her, and used the ring to reach Diagon Alley. He had discussed with Ginny about the summer, and they had decided that, if he was going to arrive in the evening, he would hide himself under someone else’s appearance. He spent several seconds reviewing in his mind who would be the most innocuous person, and the only face he came up with was Luna’s. As he didn’t know who was at the Weasleys’ at the moment, she was the surest bet. He then used the surrounding darkness to concentrate, discreetly transforming his features into the Ravenclaw’s. He then entered the Leaky Cauldron and used its Floo access to reach the Burrow. He couldn’t have done it from Luna’s place because it simply didn’t have a chimney, something which had helped his choice of face.

Harry stumbled through the Weasleys’ fireplace and, not used to his new body’s balance, barely prevented his fall by grasping the nearest redhead. Unfortunately, his momentum was such that he pushed said redhead through the room until they fell on the couch, still grasping each other.

In the stunned silence that ensued, Harry felt the blood rushing to his face as he noticed the whole Weasley clan staring at him and... Charlie.

The Dragon Keeper smirked. "Thanks for the attention, young lady, but... weren't you Ron girlfriend?"

The question and the strong arms around his female body reminded him of his uncomfortable position and he blushed some more while pushing on Charlie to stand up. Unfortunately, Charlie released his grip too suddenly and Harry found himself taking a few steps back, arms flailing, until he stumbled and fell on his behind, bewildered at the turn of events. His wide eyes looking the room's occupants were the last straw, and everyone started to laugh at the humour of the situation. He grumbled and stood up, before straightening his clothes.

Still blushing, and still with Luna's appearance, he took the cup of tea that Molly Weasley had filled during the incident and that she was handing him under a amused gaze. He thanked the matriarch and, not thinking about it, sat next to Ginny, putting his free arm around her shoulders.

Everybody looked at him strangely, except Ron and Ginny who had noticed the strangeness and who knew more about Harry than anyone else.

"Err... Luna, it's our sister that you're holding, there-"

"-not our stargazing brother you should go out with."

Harry looked at the twins, at Ginny, and at Ron, his eyes wide. That elicited another round of laugh, until his female voice could be heard.

"Well, I thought that, with you all mocking me, I was going to stay on the women's side."

That was intended to calm the atmosphere. Alas, the double meaning wasn't lost to Ron and Ginny, and the two youngest Weasley laughed

until tears were falling from their eyes while Harry blushed even more. The others didn't quite understand, and tried to, but Ron and Ginny couldn't think about it without sniggering again. Harry simply muttered "private joke."

After the commotion, Harry sipped his tea, slowly coming to grips with his new body. He hadn't thought about that when he had shape-shifted into Luna, but it opened a whole new pathway for disturbing thoughts, most of them jarred unto nothingness when Ron stood and told everyone he was going to bed. That wasn't a disturbing fact, but the ensuing conversation would stay in his memory for eons.

"Ron, don't you kiss Luna goodbye?" At Fred's jab, Harry silently cursed his lack of forethought again. Of course, what did he imagine, arriving in a household as someone's girlfriend?

Harry wasn't moving, quite believing that if he didn't move, they would forget about him. He didn't hate Ron, no, but nowhere in his education was the concept of two males kissing put in a good light. Intellectually, he knew that homosexuality existed, and the very few openly gay people in Hogwarts didn't look like they were monsters or whatever. But this was different.

His immobility didn't have the wanted result, as George took him by the hand and shoved him in front of Ron. "There, you see? She was waiting anxiously for a proper nightly greeting."

The situation was quickly becoming extremely uncomfortable, but Ron looked in his eyes, and, shrugging, he bent toward Harry, and kissed his cheek lightly. Then he left, pushing his way through his twin brothers. Harry was still standing, sporting a Weasley blush, a hand covering the kissed cheek, not quite understanding what had happened.

The twins hooted at Ron's departing back, and at Luna's blush, before calming themselves as their mother decided it was time for a sharp yell.

“Fred! George! Behave yourselves! If you act like this when you’re invited, you won’t have any friends in no time! Now go hide your shame in your room!” After the twins had left, she turned toward Harry and spoke gentler. “I’m sorry for these sad excuses for sons. If you want to stay the night, I will open the guest bed in Ginny’s bedroom. Do you agree?”

Harry nodded, too embarrassed to speak properly. He was blushing even more than before. If only they knew! Thinking about it, it would be better that they don’t know about it. He would be the end of every joke for the next decade if they did. However, here was his girlfriend’s mother, practically sending him in her room. Not knowing what to answer, he stayed there, looking at her, barely acknowledging that Charlie and Arthur had left too, leaving the “girls” by themselves, Arthur telling his wife that he was going to prepare the guest bed.

Seeing that Harry was reflecting, Molly put her arms on his shoulder. “If you have issues with Ron, we can talk about it, you know? Girls’ talk?”

Harry stuttered. The evening had been rich in surprises, and he hadn’t been able to speak properly for the whole time. Thankfully, Ginny, who had been holding her laughter the whole time, took pity of him. “Mum, I think Luna is really tired.” she managed to say in a barely controlled voice.

Harry could only nod dumbly, and mutter incoherent good-night wishes, before being dragged through the stairs toward Ginny’s room. There, Ginny quickly put some pillows under the bed linens, to simulate people sleeping, before looking intently at Harry’s hand, visibly having breathing difficulties. Understanding the message, he took her hand, making her touch the ring, and they portkeyed to his hideaway.

There, free to express her mirth, Ginny gave a new dimension of the expression “rolling on the floor laughing”. Harry transformed back into himself, and Ginny howled in laughter some more at his pouting expression.

“If you say anything...” he started, but couldn’t continue, as she visibly wasn’t listening to him, still laughing and holding her stomach.

Twenty minutes went by, before she was too cramped in the stomach to laugh anymore. Breathing with difficulty, she started to recover, but still couldn’t look at him without giggling some more.

“Phew... you should try it someday.” she said, speaking about her laughing fit. “It really helps your breathing.”

“Yeah. You should try my stunt, too.” he smirked, fully knowing what would happen.

She couldn’t hold it, and fell back on the floor, laughing again.

“Stop!” she managed to pant through her fits. “Don’t... don’t say things like this.”

He went to the bathroom and, after putting water in the glass, returned to the main room and held it to her.

“Thanks.” she told him, and drank.

They looked at each other, small smiles still floating on their mouths. Even if the scene had been difficult for Harry, Ginny’s mirth had propagated to him, and he wasn’t blushing or pouting anymore.

“Seriously, Harry. Of all our friends, why did you choose Luna? You could have chosen any of Ron’s dorm mates!”

“I didn’t really think about it. I had just left her, so she was the only one that I knew wasn’t visiting the Burrow at that moment.”

“Well. Anyways, thank you for the laugh. I’m sorry about it, but-”

“Don’t be. I understand. I guess we will be able to laugh about it again in the future. But don’t tell the others, okay?”

Her eyes lit up mischievously. "Why not? Fred and George would be sooo interested..."

"Oh noooo..." groaned Harry. "I've created a monster."

"I'll show you what is a monster, monster." she retorted playfully.

"Which one?" He held his hands up and wiggled his fingers. "The tickle monster?"

And, with that, he lunged toward her, and they spent the next thirty minutes playfully tickling each other. When they stopped, Ginny was on the bed, lying on her stomach, her head sideways, and Harry was lying atop her. He had been tickling her, but she had captured his hands in hers, and they were stuck. If she released his hands, he would tickle her, but if she didn't, he couldn't move. Stalemate.

Well... not quite. Harry's brain, fully in the game, found another way to tickle her. Not immediately understanding the possible consequences, he approached his mouth to her ear and nibbled her earlobe. He had expected her to buck, to shout about the unfairness, or to laugh. He was surprised when she closed her eyes and sighed. Curious about her reaction, he stopped and looked at her. She was breathing deeply and unevenly, and he was frightened about her health for a split second.

She then opened her eyes and looked at him. Chocolate pupils met emerald ones and held them prisoner. She released his wrists, and turned around in his arms, still looking deeply in his eyes, their souls so close that it was almost painful. Harry's arm began to tire, and he allowed himself to lower his body even closer to hers. When their faces were less than an inch away, she raised her head, closing the distance.

Even if they had felt closer before, even if they knew they loved each other, they hadn't tried love's physical manifestation yet. The first kiss they shared felt like nothing existed anymore. Their lips sealed, they spent a long time unmoving, their hearts beating together furiously.

Their blood rushed in their bodies at great speed, energizing them, and their ears buzzed from the shared feelings.

“I love you” he heard her say despite the buzzing.

“Mmmm mmm” he tried to answer, before jolting upright, realizing something. Several things, in fact.

First of all, she had spoken while kissing him, and without moving her lips. How was that possible?

He blinked several times. The second thing he realized was that he was now blind.

Well... not exactly blind. Rather colour blind. And even this was inexact as everything he knew about colour blindness couldn't apply to what he was now seeing. Or not seeing. Ginny was in front of him, but he wasn't seeing her. The only close thing related to what he was seeing came from a memory of a muggle biology class, when they had overviewed the nerves.

With a shock, he realized that he was seeing a Ginny's neural system. And it moved. Little sparks shot from places toward others. It was in only one colour, but he noticed differences in intensity in the head and around the heart. Tentatively, he reached out with his hand to stroke her cheek, and gasped at the sight of his own arm's nerves.

He looked around him, and noticed something else. The room had disappeared. Well, not exactly, again. He distinctly saw the still-unopened box that lied on the bookcase, and the general shape of the floor, ceiling, and walls. The furniture, though, were almost invisible. Only the bed was visible, because it was inside a...

He gasped when he finally noticed the globe around him. He was, with the bed and the now gawking Ginny under him, inside a crackling sphere of electricity. Understanding dawned on him and he silently thanked Luna. He hadn't fallen unconscious this time, nor had destroyed the room or shocked Ginny. Well, that was almost incorrect

again, because she was plainly shocked at the sphere, not knowing about his other realizations.

As his conscious mind was slowly taking control of his body again, his subconsciously formed sphere began to falter, threatening to actually do the destroying and shocking it avoided earlier.

Harry looked at Ginny, flesh and tissue slowly coming back in his view of her. "I..." he panted, trying to control the massive amount of energy that was crackling around them. He realized that it was due to their kiss, and smiled briefly. He also noticed that the room was helping him, absorbing as much as it could in its spellwork. The surrounding light shone brighter. The walls began to display a kaleidoscope of colours. The bed hummed audibly. But it wasn't enough and he had to release it soon or it would destroy him.

Ginny noticed the strained smile and the changed surroundings, and asked "What? What is this and-"

He closed his eyes, not noticing her hand creeping over his. "I have to go... somewhere safe... I'll be... back. Lakelogleiwarts!"

He arrived right next to Hogwarts' lake, barely lit by the crescent moon. But he wasn't alone. He groaned. Ginny had grasped his ring hand, and was now with him, looking around with wonder in her eyes.

He was thankful that the sphere of energy had followed him, but concerned about Ginny's well-being. His first intent had been to simply make the ball of energy explode, but with Ginny there, he thought it could be highly dangerous. He looked around him, panicked, until he noticed the ground.

Ground. Grounding. Lightning conductors protecting houses from lightning by sending it to the ground. Luna's explanations.

Still holding Ginny's hand, he put his own bare hand on the soil, digging a little for better contact, and concentrated.

The time was eleven in the evening, and most of the few people living in Hogwarts during the summer vacation were sleeping. Argus Filch was sleeping, as he was recovering from the numerous nights spent

stalking the corridors in search of students to punish. Sybil Trelawney was sleeping in the fumes of her lavender-scented incense. Rubeus Hagrid was sleeping, his massive dog Fang at his feet. The half-giant teaching Care of Magical Creatures was exhausted from his day spent in trying to subdue another dangerous creature. Pomona Sprout was sleeping, in her quarters overlooking the greenhouses. Severus Snape was not sleeping, occupied with several delicate potions which he couldn't start during the year.

Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall weren't sleeping. The current and previous masters of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were looking over the summer paperwork while sipping some tea and maintaining a light conversation. Incidentally, they were speaking about Harry Potter.

"Now that we know he's alive, we ought to bring him back to the school." started McGonagall.

"Of course, of course. However, he missed a year. He will have to start in third year."

"Albus... couldn't we bring him up to date during the summer? From what Miss Granger tells us, he's quite advanced in several subjects."

"We could if he wasn't avoiding us. Do you remember that he specifically asked for us not to be present during his meetings? If it wasn't for Hermione, we wouldn't know what they talk about. I had half the mind to go there anyway once or twice."

"The boy has been scarred, Albus. He's slowly recovering, and finds solace in his friends. I'm not sure that he would have taken our presence well. He might have left not to come back, staying hidden in the muggle world. After all, Miss Granger told us that he was fine, even after having lived as a muggle for a whole year."

Dumbledore sipped his tea and grimaced. He then took several yellow balls and dropped them in his cup. Offering one to the Headmistress, he asked "Lemon drop?"

She shook her head annoyingly. Even if she had liked the man to the point of almost asking him out several decades ago, he always turned around the topics he didn't want to talk about. Harry was physically elusive, true, but then, the old wizard was conversationally elusive. And sometimes mentally, too. Like now... it's dark outside, so why in the hell was he looking through the window? Why was he...?

Even with his old bones, Dumbledore jumped from his seat, unceremoniously spilling his cup on the floor. The old man practically ran to the window while the Headmistress followed him with her eyes. He had almost reached it, fumbling with his glasses, when, suddenly, a bright white light came from outside, forcing both of them to shield their eyes. The light was immediately followed by sound like a hundred thunderclaps, and the resulting shockwave caused the window to explode inwards, showering the office and its occupants with glass shards, and blowing every candle.

After five minutes of recovering their eyesight, both looked at each other.

"What-" started McGonagall, before being interrupted by the door opening. In quick succession came the summer's resident teachers. Snape entered first, clothes torn and completely covered in a gooey and greenish slime. He had been carefully pouring griffin blood in his Peppering-up potion batch, and the shockwave had made him drop the full beaker in the cauldron, resulting in a rather large explosion. The Potion Master was furious, but couldn't ask anything as he was pushed aside by a frightful looking Herbology teacher, a grumpy caretaker, and a wide-eyed Divination professor.

They all talked at the same time, and Dumbledore held his hands up.

"Wait, wait, wait! I know you wonder about what woke you up..." acknowledging Snape's state, he amended "or caused an accident. I don't know either, and I propose that we investigate the place."

"The place? Which place?" asked McGonagall.

Dumbledore went back to the window and pointed outside. They couldn't see well because of the night, but they still noticed that a large circle of ground was darker than usual. Wondering about that, they followed the old wizard outside, wands drawn in case of danger. On their way, they found an anxious groundskeeper, rather fetching in his striped pyjama.

Ignoring Hagrid's questions, they exited the castle and inspected the darker ground in the light of several Lumos spells. The grass was burnt, and even the soil beneath it was damaged. The earth had turned solid, and was still warm to the touch.

"Albus," whispered professor Sprout, "what did that?"

"I don't know, Pomona, but the source of this is behind this... tree."

The aforementioned tree wasn't a tree anymore. Whatever happened had blasted the branches and a good part of the trunk. Only its core was still standing, but it wasn't even looking like wood anymore. Bypassing the tree, they noticed a circle of untouched grass, the diameter of which was roughly four feet.

"How did you know it was here, Albus?" asked Snape, prodding the grass as if it was a dangerous creature.

"I saw a sphere of light there from Minerva's office," McGonagall gasped, understanding the old man's attitude earlier "and when I wanted to see it better, it... it exploded."

"Do you think it's a Death Eater attack?" asked Sprout. Trelawney and Filch looked at Dumbledore expectantly, as they had wanted to ask the same question but didn't dare, although for different reasons.

"I don't think so." answered Snape. "Nothing they do usually can reach that far. Have you seen the blast's radius? Besides, if it has been, they would have attacked the castle right afterwards, which is useless to them right now, as deserted of students as it is."

“True.” commented Dumbledore. “And the centre of the blast is also inside the newly-built wards, so they couldn’t have reached there without warning us.”

“Did you adapt the wards to animagus, like you said?” asked McGonagall.

“Yes, I did. And they didn’t detect anything. I don’t think it’s a natural event, but I don’t understand it nonetheless.”

The others shivered in the cold night, quite frightened at the man’s statement. Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard alive, was helpless in front of an unknown event and they feared that it would happen again.

“What was that?”

He didn’t answer and slumped on the bed, shivering despite the room’s comfortable temperature.

“Harry! What was that?” Ginny’s tone was clearly showing her fear and worry.

Harry closed his eyes and motioned her closer with his good hand, his other one still smoking.

“Don’t worry... I’ll explain... do not...” he muttered, before passing out.

Ginny wanted to lie against him to comfort him, wanted to help him, to heal him, but the bed prevented it, mechanical arms raising and tearing his clothing. She wanted to interfere, but his last words came back to her mind. Don’t worry.

At that moment, she noticed two things at the same time. Two things that sent her to the bathroom, although for different reasons. The first was that the mechanical arms were tearing through his clothes. All his clothes. Despite her curiosity, she wasn’t ready to watch her boyfriend nude yet.

The second reason for leaving the room was revealed when the arms began to actually remove the clothes. She had been frightened when she had noticed the state of his hand. But his hand wasn't the only problem. Her eyes watering, she could only bring her hands to her mouth in shock, her stomach retching at the sight of the charred state of his skin. The right side of his torso was burnt, and his whole right arm was blackened and still smoking from whatever had happened earlier. The clothes, ripped by the bed arms, left Harry's body with a sickening sound, and Ginny's last sight before leaving the room was the arms buttering Harry's blistered tissues with an unknown cream.

Why was he always stuck in such situations? Why did he have to suffer that much? Merely evoking this, she slumped against the wall, and began to sob uncontrollably. She was exhausted, though, and despite the uncomfortable posture, she cried herself to sleep. Harry groaned, and tried to sit. The pain that shot through his arm, though, brought him back down with a gasp. His mind was still foggy, and he lifting his right arm, trying to see what was wrong with it. Staring at its heavily bandaged limb in wonder, he suddenly remembered the events of the day before, and gasped again.

His movements woke Ginny, and she sat up on the desk chair where she had collapsed previously.

"Awake already?" she asked with a feeble smile.

"Why 'already'?" he couldn't help but be worried by her unkempt appearance and red-rimmed eyes.

"Harry, you slept for three days. Three days!"

He could only gawk at her, while his stomach confirmed her statement by growling loudly. As if on cue, a mechanical arm erupted from the bedside with two cups of a smoking brown substance on it. She sniffed it suspiciously and, recognizing the smell, opened her eyes wide. After verifying the taste by sipping a mouthful from the cup, she turned toward Harry, smiling widely.

“Chocolate!”

Propped on his left arm, he tried to take the cup with his right, but simply couldn't operate it. Ginny saw his pained wince and, putting her own cup down, helped him to swallow the hot beverage. The drink must have been laced with something, though, because they both fell asleep soon afterwards.

Harry was the first to wake after several hours, and, wincing, he succeeded in sitting up before Ginny woke up too. He looked at his watch, but the small device had stopped working a long time ago. He glanced at the waking form of Ginny, but remembered that the young witch never had a watch.

“How long?” he asked, before noticing his sticky mouth. He would sure use a breath freshener some time soon.

She blinked, not fully awake yet. “How long what?”

He swallowed with difficulty. “...did I sleep?”

She looked around. No sun to tell the time, no clock either. “I don't know. I know you slept for a long time, though, because I spent the equivalent of three days waiting.”

“I'm sorry, I...” he opened and closed his mouth repeatedly. “I'd use a glass of water.”

She fetched it, and, once again, helped him drink from it. During this, he suddenly took into account his state of dress. Or rather undress. And he spluttered, sending water everywhere.

“What?” asked Ginny, worried at his reaction.

“I'm na... where are my clothes?”

Her eyes apologetic, she designated a pile of wide ribbons on the floor, with a suspect red-black tinge to them.

He looked at her inquiringly. "Did you do me? I mean..." he tried to explain, blushing, "did you undress me?"

"No!" She was positively shocked, although it could have been possible. If the bed hadn't done the deed, she would have had to do it in order to heal him. With a trembling voice, she explained his state and the bed's reaction to it. She also told him that she couldn't sleep in the bed, because every few hours, the mechanical arms would reach out and change his bandages, buttering him with more cream in the process. The two times she had fallen asleep on the bed, she had been promptly thrown out of it by the arms, although gently. She had then chosen to sleep on the cushioned bench from the sports room. Hearing this, he promised himself that he'd buy a bed for her soon.

Because he asked, she also recounted what she did while she was awake. Most of the books were useless for her, and she had focussed on reading the books about creatures. Blushing, she also admitted browsing through his sketchpads, and congratulated him on his drawing skills. When he told her that the first drawings had been drawn when he was amnesic, she could only gape at them again, while he also admitted that drawing her had been helpful to start recovering his memory.

Afterwards, they laid contentedly next to each other, while making sure not to strain Harry's recovering arm. After several seconds, Ginny reflected aloud about the bed not ejecting her during the chocolate-induced sleep, and suspected that Harry's arm might be completely healed.

"Not completely, I assure you." he said, wincing.

"Still, with the time you spent sleeping, you can be quite healed now."

"How much time, again?"

“I gather that, with this last night, at least three full days passed by. Perhaps four.”

“That makes... one full day! Your parents! They will be worried!”

“You’re right, we should head there. You’re ready?”

He tried to move, and winced again. “Perhaps I should stay here for a few days. You can go.”

“But... Harry, how?”

He held his good hand out. “Take the ring.”

“I can’t! Harry, it’s yours, and if I can’t go back here, you’ll be stranded, right?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. I trust you not to forget the simple word I’ll teach you. But first, remove the ring, please. I can’t do it myself.”

Still unsure about it, she did it nonetheless. To her surprise, Harry then grasped it, and, his eyes locked in hers, he put the ring to her finger. No word was exchanged for a long time, until both turned around, blushing.

“Well...” Harry stuttered, before speaking correctly again. “The activation word to come back here is ‘safehaven’. You’ll remember it?”

She nodded, her face still red.

“If four full days passed here,” he reflected aloud, “I guess that one full day passed outside. Your parents must be worried, and... Oh my god!”

“What?”

“I hope they didn’t owl Luna!”

They looked at each other with eyes wide.

“If they did,” she said, “they will discover that she wasn’t there. If Ron doesn’t tell them, they’ll believe I’ve been abducted! Oh my god!”

“Best to go back quickly, then, and ease their fears. I trust you to invent something on the spot, though. As soon as everything is cleared, come back here, please.”

“Of course, Harry.”

She approached him, intending to kiss him good-bye, before stopping dead in her tracks.

“Harry?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know... why this happened?”

He stayed silent for a moment, looking at her thoughtfully. After a long pause, she started to move around restlessly, and he answered. His voice was so low, though, that she had to bend to hear it.

“I might have an explanation.” Raising his head, he continued. “I will think about it and tell you everything when you’ll be back. You should go to your parents, now.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. Besides,” he smirked, “without the ring, it’s not as if I could leave the place, isn’t it?”

She smirked evilly, before answering “You know, I might let you rot in here, alone.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” was his shocked answer.

“Why?”

He reflected about it, and then smirked. Lending toward her using his good arm for support, he placed a fugitive kiss on her lips. “Because you love me.”

She blushed, her face turning a deep red at his recognizing her feelings for him. However, interacting with her brothers for so long had given her the need for the last word. “And?”

“And I love you too.”

She lunged to him, kissing him on the lips again. They stayed like this for a few seconds, before Harry nudged her away. “You...” he gasped, “you have to go, now.”

She looked at him reproachfully, before taking in the crackling sphere of electricity around them. It was smaller and less bright than the previous time, but she remembered what had happened, and gasped, shaking his arm distressfully.

“Harry! What is happening?”

He winced, trying to control the phenomenon. Sweat beads began to appear on his forehead.

“Ginny... I don’t have time now... repeat what I say...”

She nodded. Pushing her a tad away, Harry uttered two words, which she repeated.

“Preceding strut.”

Harry’s hideaway disappeared around her, to be replaced by her own bedroom, back at the Burrow. The light coming from her slanted window told her that the sun was already up. Knowing her room very well, she judged that it was around eight in the morning already. Has it been four days already?

She opened her door carefully, looking in the stairs. Nobody. She tiptoed out of her room, and went to close the door when she remarked something. The guest bed was still in her room. How strange...

Not having time to check about this, as she heard sound from the kitchen, she closed the door and went downstairs without making a sound. Approaching the kitchen, she saw her mother preparing breakfast for everyone. Surprised, Ginny looked at the scene carefully.

Her mother was whistling happily. How could that be if she had disappeared? Or didn't she care about her?

Then, there were the plates on the table. Nine. Except if the twins brought some girlfriends home, there weren't nine persons at home. And those troublemakers would have to wait a long time for Molly Weasley allowing them to bring girls home. Ginny smirked, but shot in the air when her mother addressed her.

"Come in, Ginny, come in!"

She was smiling her usual way, but shot her a concerned look. "My my my! Did you sleep in your clothes? You forgot where the hamper is, perhaps?"

At Ginny's look of incomprehension, the Weasley matriarch huffed. "I guess Hogwarts disturbs my children more than usual. Oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't want to hurt you."

Molly Weasley had seen Ginny's frown and had interpreted it as the result of her first year's bad memories. Hideous memories. She hugged her lastborn in earnest, before Ginny reacted.

"Mum. Mum!"

"Hmmm what, darling?"

“Your pancakes are burning.”

Molly turned around with a shriek and ran to the stove, several choice words tumbling out of her mouth. Ginny smirked, before frowning again. She hadn't frowned because of memories about her first year. She had frowned, because...

“Ginny, dear?”

“Hmmm... yes, mum?”

“What does your friend eat for breakfast?”

“My friend?”

“Yes, your friend, Luna.”

That floored her. How was that possible? Her mind constructed several weird scenarios of what had happened, the strangest being Luna arriving in the night with a metamorphmagus friend, and taking Harry's place and hers. But her room had been empty.

It was only when Molly addressed her again, dropping another pancake on the pile, that she started to understand.

“Ginny, dear. Did you forget that your friend came yesterday and stayed the night?”

Realization hit her like a high-speed train. It was the only explanation, but it meant that Harry was wrong in his calculations. The time difference factor between his hideaway and the outside world wasn't four anymore. Could he be wrong about something else? She started to wonder about the best moment to go back to inform him about it when she felt a hand on her arm. She raised her eyes to meet her mother's worried ones.

“Are you alright, dear?”

She smiled. "Yes, mum. I was just thinking about Luna. You see, she had forgotten that she had something to do, about her father's journal, and she left early." Looking at herself, she smoothly continued. "It was really early, and I was dressed, but I guess I fell asleep again. Hence my rumpled clothes. Sorry, mum."

"No worry, dear. No worry. Too bad your friend isn't here today, though."

"Why so?"

"Don't you remember yesterday's planning? We are going to visit Charlie's dragon reserve in Romania for a fortnight. That is, except Percy who got a starting job at the Ministry again. The trip will be a bit long, because we have to sign at the Ministry before they can make us a portkey for the round trip. We could have taken the international Floo network, but it's difficult enough to use it nationwide without getting too dirty... With such a long distance, we would land somewhere else, covered with inches of soot. However, your dad and I went there once, and it has been interesting, and... Darling? Are you alright?"

Ginny wasn't. She had completely forgotten about that visit, and now knew that she wouldn't have a moment of freedom before arriving in Romania, late at night. She sighed, and hoped that Harry would understand.

She nodded to her mother, before seating at the table. "I'm okay, mum."

Grasping a few pancakes, she made a show of eating them vigorously, and Molly smiled. Ginny smirked internally. Nothing was better than one's apparent appetite to convince her mother about one's good health. She really was hungry, though, and stayed at the table for the best part of an hour, satisfying her mum's prying mind by telling stories that Luna supposedly told her before sleep.

After Ginny's departure, Harry was quite distraught. But not because she wasn't there anymore, even if it tugged at his heart somewhat. He was having enormous difficulties with his sphere of electricity

again. He had tried to absorb it, and the ball lost some more power, but it wasn't sufficient. Once again, he was seeing the electricity around him, and he reflected that it must be the Elemental Vision Luna had talked about. Glancing around him again in search of an outlet for his overflowing power, he noticed something new. In the ceiling, hidden from the normal view, there was a square different than the rest. In his vision, it was brighter than the surrounding tiles, as if it held some power in it, although Harry didn't know which power and to what use. He also didn't know how to activate it.

Concentrating on the energy sphere again, he looked around again, and decided to pass the overflowing energy onto something not magical and not dangerous to break. After all, he could always conjure or transfigure something to replace the item should it break. The only thing in his whole hideaway matching this was the bench in the sport room. The poor bench was already marked from previous tests of his element, and he didn't feel bad about it.

He stood up with difficulty, struggling to keep the lightning ball under control, and slumped over the sport room. Once there, he avoided the overly-enlarged trunk hosting his Basilisk skin depot, and approached the bench. Not wanting to repeat Hogwarts' mishap, he didn't merely touch it. He grasped it in his valid hand, and, using all the muscular strength he could muster, lifted it. He then concentrated, although in a different way than in Hogwarts.

There, he had had difficulties holding the sphere together, and had concentrated to expulse all the sphere power through his hand in one go. That's why his whole right side, not used to managing that much energy, had burnt.

Holding the bench, he split his concentration, still trying to control the sphere and passing its power to the bench. Instead of passing it through his hand like he had always done, he tried to pass it directly, unsure about the possible result. To his surprise and delight, it worked perfectly. The bench's material wasn't metallic, so it didn't conduct electricity very well, but it was also having a greater resistance to the power. Harry could send more and more power into it without melting it.

However, every material has a breaking point, and, after passing most of his excess energy to it, the bench suddenly disappeared. It didn't disappear by Apparating, or by portkey, or by any magical mean. In fact, it didn't disappear at all. It was vaporized. The sturdy wooden bench was transformed into a puff of smoke in a split second.

Harry looked at where the bench was, eyes wide and mouth gaping. He hadn't envisioned this suddenness at all. Wincing in pain, he also realized that holding something which was being vaporized was very painful, although his burnt arm had been worse. He went back to the bed, knowing what would happen there, and, true to his prediction, the bed's mechanical arms applied some more cream on his welts, and gave him another dose of sleeping potion. He downed it, and went to sleep again, whatever energy remaining from his sphere of lightning dissipating harmlessly into the bed's structure.

While waiting for Ginny's return, Harry spent his time healing, reading, and thinking. Well... of course, he did eat, wash, sleep, and all other necessary human activities. He started with re-reading the chapter on wandless magic, and tried to apply it to transfigure pillows into benches, but failed to even start changing the pillows' texture.

His thinking mostly revolved around his elemental abilities, and he used his free time to evoke a ball of lightning again, although a small one, and absorb it. In this way, he accustomed his body to the energy travelling through it. During these exercises, he also succeeded in bringing forth his elemental vision again, and Luna had been true in saying that it helped the elemental manipulation.

Thinking about everything Luna had said, though, made him realize the reason behind the two spheres' appearance. He had had an inkling when the second one appeared, but, thinking about it, he was quite sure, now. Besides, the biggest spheres of lightning he called were when he thought about her.

His feelings for Ginny were blossoming.  
After his first day, he became restless.

After the second, he grew worried.

After the third, he spent several hours a day working his muscles again with the weight bar.

After the fifth, he switched to sword practise. These exercises helped his muscular development, and made the time pass swifter.

He wasn't angry at Ginny or anything but, when she appeared again, after a full week, he couldn't help himself and snapped at her.

"Hey! Did you forget me?"

Noticing her hurt expression and generally tired state, he forgot about his restlessness and approached her.

"Errm... sorry, Gin. I..."

"It's okay. I have several things to tell you, though."

"Me too."

She was sitting on the bed already, and he sat beside her, taking her hand in his.

"You seem to have recovered pretty well." she started uneasily.

"Well, you know... it has been a week..."

"I thought so. That's what I wanted to speak about." She looked him in the eye, and recounted her day. He was flabbergasted upon realizing that the time factor had changed so drastically, and could only elaborate that it was his fault somewhat. He was also surprised about the family trip for Charlie's reserve. Absently stroking Ginny's hair during her recounting, he smiled at a wild thought. If he could study dragons...

...he could transform into one.

To be continued in next chapter: Strange Beasts Indeed...

I'm not partial, but first kiss  
Had to display such a bliss.  
Enjoy heaven while you can,  
They'll soon hit the frying pan.

## Chapter 33 – Strange Beasts Indeed

Having recovered his ring from Ginny, Harry used its 'going back' feature to transport them both back in Romania, and immediately shape-shifted into his snow owl form. They had decided that it was one of the less intrusive animals to live around wizards. The first evening was quite calm, because everybody was tired. After spending a few hours in his owl form, Harry nudged Ginny softly before flying out. Now that he knew about the changed time frame, he could spend several days without worrying, and he made good use of these days to read more about Ginevra Shaun's works. Despite wanting to know more about the Hideaway structure and actual position, he didn't find anything in the large tomes he perused, and remembered the locked box each time he approached the bookcase. In the four days of self-isolation, though, he succeeded in two of his current pet projects. The first was to activate the ring with his thoughts, so that he could transport without having vocal cords, something definitely useful when stuck with an animagus form. It was much more difficult than uttering the word, though, because his entire mind had to be focussed on the thought in a certain way. His second success was to consciously call forth his elemental vision. He didn't see much around him, though, as there wasn't any other living creature with him at the moment.

After his retreat, he rejoined Ginny as an owl. They then spent the next day exploring the settlement and generally having fun with her brothers, and they made a few discoveries. Charlie had spoken multiple times about his job as Dragon Keeper, but they hadn't imagined what it entailed. The settlement was in a large and thick forest, on a ground made of rolling hills, and the closest muggle town was hundreds of miles away. The hamlet itself included every little shop needed, as well as a Floo service doubling as post office. There was the pub, which doubled as an inn for the occasional traveller. There was the librarian whose wife was the local apothecary. And there was the utilities shop, selling almost everything that wasn't available in the other shops. If you wanted something precise, though, you had to wait for him to fetch him in another town, with an added cost and delay.

The last shop was the most renowned of the settlement, and, in itself, was the reason behind most of the visitors' presence: it sold dragon-related products. Dragons weren't hunted, but, with the proximity of the reserve, the shopkeeper had a supply of material from dragons which died of natural causes. There, thinking about his wand-making job and wanting to try new combinations before making his own wand, Harry assumed a new human face and a false name before buying a few heartstrings from each dragon species, as well as horns from Romanian Longhorn dragons, hide from Ukrainian Ironbelly dragons, and teeth from the Norwegian Ridgeback and the Peruvian Vipertooth species. He then brought Ginny in his hideaway and explained his purchases, before portkeying with her in Ollivander's back office. There, he could store the wand cores in the appropriate containers.

It was getting late in the afternoon, but Harry and Ginny had decided that, should they be stranded in Harry's refuge again, several pieces of furniture would enhance the stay. However, in order to facilitate the purchase handling, as well as to add space, Harry led Ginny to the trunk store situated on top of Madam Malkin's. To the lone shopkeeper, he introduced Ginny as his girlfriend, and asked to buy an enlarged trunk again, but with the added function to adhere to a wall, thus acting as a door. It was a good thing that they had visited the trunks shop before any furniture reseller, because several of these came with the furniture already. The man showed them to the appropriate section, and they had to choose between a dozen models: from the little monk cell with a single bed to the 4-room palace suite comprising a fully-functional kitchenette. Despite Harry wanting the biggest, better, and most expensive for Ginny, he relented to her arguments of necessity, and they finally settled for a single room, although large enough to accommodate a queen-sized bed, a dresser, as well as a desk and its chair. The added benefit of the bulk purchase was that the furniture set was decorated in the same way. Each piece of furniture was adorned with birds, something they joked about, Harry being currently hiding from the Weasleys under his owl form. Harry paid the thousand Galleons required, and they thanked the shopkeeper before leaving directly to Harry's hideaway. After installing the new bedroom, they came back to the dragon reserve to finish their exploration.

There wasn't much to explore per se, as the few remaining houses were for Dragon Keepers. There were a dozen homes for the few keepers who had family, with both parents generally being Dragon Keepers themselves. The unmarried ones shared a large communal house. A last house was reserved for visiting families, and Charlie, after a few years of waiting, had succeeded in reserving it for two weeks. The house was big enough to accommodate every Weasley, even with one room each. Even with the added space, the twins had insisted to share a room, and Arthur and Molly obviously slept together.

The next day, Charlie brought them to see the dragons. The young Weasleys, and the owl which was always perched on Ginny's shoulder, gaped at the sight. Even with Charlie describing his job numerous times, they had never imagined that the dragons were... free. There was no paddock or any other enclosing material. While they looked in awe at the dragons flying around, landing with an earth-rumbling thud, and taking off again, Charlie told them about his dragon.

That got his parents' attention too. His dragon? He began to explain.

Apparently, Dragon Keepers came in several ranks. The newly-arrived, under the rank of Hatchling, had the job of maintaining the installations, sometimes cleaning the dragon's lairs, and learning everything needed for the Dragon Keeper job. After a few months and an exam, they became Flyers, and took care of the young dragons. When they deemed themselves worthy, and when a dragon accepted them, they became Dragon Mate, watching over only one dragon, and interacting between that dragon and the humans. The induction ceremony offered them limited comprehension of their dragon's language. The Dragon Mates were grouped under a Dragon Elder depending on their dragon's species. And on top of everyone was the Dragon Wurm. All these people worked in good harmony with the creatures.

Charlie began to tell them more about his Mate rank, when he noticed that his audience wasn't quite listening, looking frightfully behind him. Turning around, he noticed that something was heading their way. Something quite large, black, with flapping wings and bared teeth. A

dragon was charging them, its bronze horns trained on Charlie, and the ground was trembling.

Charlie didn't move, though. He stood between the dragon and his family, arms spread, and uttered a single word.

“Norbert!”

The name made Ron wince visibly, holding his still-scarred hand. Harry didn't wince as much as owls weren't made to wince. However, he hooted his surprise. There, in front of them, was the dragon they had helped save in their first year. And his sudden stop in front of Charlie and subsequent purring at the man's ministrations showed something that he and Ron hadn't thought possible.

Charlie was truly a Dragon Mate, and his mated dragon was Norbert! Norbert the playful. Norbert whose egg had been acquired by Hagrid two years ago. Norbert who subsequently flew from England to Romania in a box.

The Dragon Mate “introduced” them, and the dragon looked at Ron with a strange expression. Well, only Charlie noticed his strange expression, as others weren't able to decipher the beast's many facial movements. On top of that, the beast began to grunt in a strange way. Only when Charlie grunted back did they realize that it was some kind of a language. Charlie barely had the time to warn Ron not to move, while Norbert advanced his snout and licked him.

The sensation was akin to being licked by a great dog with a putrid breath and sticky saliva. Ron stumbled back before straightening himself.

“I think he simply wanted to thank you, Ron.” said Charlie as sole explanation.

“What for?” asked Molly suspiciously.

Charlie looked at her. Then at Ron. Something seemed to pass in his eyes, then he spoke. “He didn't say.”

The dragon had finished inspecting his mate's family, and was looking at Ginny with the same look than he had graced Ron. Ginny began to tremble, not wanting to be drenched in a sticky gunk, but not wanting to be eaten alive either should she flee. After all, they didn't know the extent of Charlie's control over his mate. Norbert extended his snout again, and Ginny prepared for the worst, but didn't feel anything. Instead, she felt suddenly lighter, as if a weight had been removed from her shoulder, as if...

Harry!

The owl had been caught by the creature's tongue, and only by a vigorous flapping of his drenched wings was he able to evade the mouth before hiding behind Ginny, hooting indignantly.

Norbert then rumbled some more, moving his head up and down, before turning around and leaving them. As soon as they were between humans again, notwithstanding Harry's animal form, they spoke at the same time.

"What did he say, Charlie?" asked Arthur.

"Blimey! Isn't that sticky!" said Fred, examining Ron's wet clothes.

George couldn't stop adding "Can we have some?"

"Fred! George! You'll behave this instant!" said their mother. She didn't want to shout while being so near to dangerous creatures, but her eyes were yelling volumes.

"No, brothers, you can't have it. Besides, it's quite unstable. I know that the Ukrainian Ironbelly's spit solidifies in a few hours. Norbert being a Norwegian Ridgeback, his spit is poisonous, and-"

"Poisonous!" yelled Ginny. "Why did you let him lick Ron and..." she stopped just in time. She had almost said 'Harry' and blushed, realizing her near slip-up.

“If you would let me finish?” At Ginny’s ashamed nod, he continued. “When a Ridgeback wants to thank someone, he generally does it because he owes a lot. When he licks someone that way, the poison goes in the bloodstream through the skin, which takes more time and is not as effective as-”

Fred interrupted him. “I think some of us, myself included, are quite lost...”

“...by your otherwise brilliant speech, dear brother.” finished George.

Charlie sighed. “Dragons like Norbert rarely lick people, because it gives those people a time-limited immunity to their poison.”

Molly looked at Ron with a gaping mouth, unaware that Ginny was doing the same toward Harry.

Arthur, though, hadn’t received the answer to his question, and asked it again. “What did Norbert say, Charlie?”

At that, the Dragon Keeper seemed to think for a few seconds. “It’s strange, because I have problems to translate it. Thanking and excusing oneself are quite close in draconic. I think that he thanked Ron and the owl, and he said something about helping someone.” He raised his head again. “You see, even with their enormous memory, they seldom speak about the past, even with us Mates. They also seldom explain their actions, which is why we have to learn about the species for so long. Due to my... history with the dragon, I know some things, but...” he looked intently at the owl which was now preening its feathers, “why would he thank or ask excuses to an owl?”

Three days after their arrival, Ginny and Harry were discussing calmly in Ginny’s bedroom during a peaceful afternoon. Ginny’s parents had left the house to shop at the local warehouse, Ron was meditating in his room, and the twins were god-knows-where. After the licking episode, Harry had told her about Norbert’s history, and she had scolded him about the unnecessary risks to his person, before kissing him lightly. He had also started to explain her about his elemental abilities and Luna’s theory behind the accidental surges, and since then, they only tentatively kissed, not wanting a repeat of Hogwarts’

performance. The few elemental surges that occurred were small enough for Harry to keep control over them.

During their stay around the dragon reserve, they had also taken several strolls in the forest, and added a pair of clearings to Harry's ring. The number of locations was so great now that Harry decided to write them in one of his notebooks and stow it in his hideaway. Hideaway where they spent several hours a day, quietly reading or cuddling. To avoid being discovered, Harry also spent a few nights alone in his hideaway. The time difference now was such that, while Ginny slept one regular night, he could spend three whole days instead of one, waiting for the outside time to catch the morning. During these times, he continued to read the books about Technomancy and experiment. One of those times, he was reading a passage on traps and their neutralization, and his attention got caught by a little sentence.

...and, in several cases, merely applying a strong current can disarm a trapped Technomancy construct, something which...

His finger still marking the page, he closed the book thoughtfully, looking at the mysterious box. After several minutes of pondering, he put a bookmark in his current reading and headed for the bookcase. Heaving the wooden box, he dumped it on the desk and stared at it questioningly. Knowing what would happen, he approached his hand to the lid. The bolt of electricity surged again, but Harry didn't remove his hand this time, exploring the sensation. It had been the evening in the hideaway, and he had been quite tired from a day of reading and exercise, but the bolt which entered through his hand went through his whole body, rejuvenating it on the way. After a few seconds, he felt refreshed and wondered about his element again. Could he 'recharge' himself like batteries did?

Keeping his hand on the box, he switched to his elemental vision, and looked at the box attentively. He couldn't see the inside of it, but the energy flow leading to sparks erupting from the lid was clearly visible. After wondering if he could send this energy in the other way, he decided to try it, and concentrated on his element. Immediately afterwards, the energy surges ceased and a click could be heard

from the box. Wondering about its content, Harry tried to open the wooden box but failed, as it was still sealed shut. Sighing, he hoisted it back on top of the bookcase before resuming his reading.

Three days later, while Harry and Ginny were discussing alone in the house, a rapping came from the window, and a white owl came through, before hooting madly at the two of them. Understanding dawned on them as Harry remembered leaving Hedwig in his bedroom in London. The events of the last few days had made him forget about his faithful owl, and she nipped his ear annoyingly.

“Hedwig! Hedwig! I’m sorry!”

Ginny laughed at the owl’s antics and, noticing her famished and tired state, left the room to fetch her some owl treats from the kitchen. The house hadn’t been entirely empty, though, and during that time, someone passed near the half-open door and saw the back of a black-haired person in Ginny’s room, seeming to attack Ginny’s owl.

Drawing his wand, Charlie tiptoed in the room, before speaking the Stunning spell.

“Stupefy.”

However, Harry’s reflexes had been honed by the long time spent in several animal forms, and his muscles worked as well. He jumped on the floor, barely dodging the curse, and whispered the activation word for a nearby clearing.

Ginny’s smile upon bringing owl treats faltered when she noticed the shocked form of her brother in her empty room, a short while later.

“What... where...” she couldn’t start to formulate her question, not thinking clearly but not wanting to slip up again.

He put his wand away and answered. “I saw someone here, and he was attacking your owl. I wanted to stun him, but he dodged and disappeared. Like that!” He snapped his fingers. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t do anything... And then the owl went through the window.”

During her brother's explanation, several emotions passed on Ginny's face. Incredulity, realization, anger, pride, amusement, curiosity, and surprise. Fully on his report, though, Charlie didn't see any of it. She dropped the owl treats on the desk and closed the bedroom door.

"Well... looks like she's back already." Charlie pointed at Hedwig's form entering the room again.

He closed the window and tried to catch the fugitive owl, but Hedwig turned around him, hooting annoyingly, before landing on Ginny's shoulder, her leg extended with a message.

Ginny read it, and nodded to herself. She then dropped Hedwig on the desktop near the owl treats and opened the window. In front of her surprised brother, another snow owl entered the room and hooted before setting on Ginny's shoulder. Hedwig looked at the newcomer, but, to Charlie's surprise, didn't compete with the other bird.

"Charlie?"

He looked up. Ginny was looking at him with a mocking smile.

"Uh... yes?"

"Are you alright, Charlie?"

"I'm... I don't know. One moment, I see an intruder, and the next, you open an aviary?"

"Well, Charlie, I can explain." She became serious, and the owl on her shoulder began to hoot restlessly.

"You can?"

"Do you believe in magic, Charlie?" she was openly smirking now, and her brother knew he had been had.

"Very funny." he huffed. The line 'Do you believe in magic?' was often the first used to explain the wizarding world to muggles,

generally muggleborn wizards' parents. Using it on a wizard was a common way to insult his intelligence and knowledge of the world. Feeling offended even if he knew her sister had been half-joking, Charlie headed for the door. "Next time you're attacked, don't wait for me, though."

"Charlie?"

"What?" he was still grumpy, but stopped at the closed door, his back still toward her. Unknown to him, the girl was looking intently at the owl, which nodded back.

"Do you believe in magic, Charlie?"

The voice was different, now. It wasn't Ginny's voice anymore. It sounded more like a boy's.

Not quite understanding the change, Charlie turned slowly around, and noticed that there wasn't any owl on his sister's shoulder anymore. Instead, a black-haired teenage boy was standing beside her, smiling, his arms encircling Ginny's waist.

"I guess we haven't really met before." continued the boy. "Allow me... err... actually, Ginny darling, can you do the presentations? It's rather impolite for people to present themselves." he said, his eyes twinkling. Charlie still didn't know who the guy was, but he seemed polite enough, and Ginny was smiling openly, something she would certainly not do if she was threatened.

"I'll do, darling. The gaping redhead in front of you is my brother Charlie. Charlie, the raven-haired wizard next to me is my boyfriend."

"Ginny," said boyfriend asked in mock concern, "you forgot something."

"Oh yes, I did." she answered, before turning to Charlie, eyes glinting with mischief. "My boyfriend is strong, clever, cute-"

“Gin!” A blushing Harry looked at Ginny annoyingly. “I don’t think Charlie wishes to know about this.”

Said Charlie was a bit lost at the playful back-and-forth banter.

“Right, right. If one can’t amuse oneself...” She took a deep breath. “Charlie, this is Harry. Harry Potter.”

Charlie was stunned. Surely, this was a huge prank. He turned around, trying to discern where were hidden the twins. Not seeing his fun-loving brothers, he concluded that it must be the truth. “P... Po... Pot... Potter?”

Harry’s smile widened, and he turned toward Ginny. “Fred and George owe me a Galleon each!”

“Why so?”

“You witnessed one of your brothers stuttering my name like an old teacher of us – name’s Quirrell – and I did bet with them one Galleon that that would have happened. Next one is Percy.”

“You strike bets like that without inviting me?”

“Well...”

“How dare you?”

“You weren’t around at the time.”

“Tell me, Harry Potter, when was the time you were with my pranking brother without me around?”

“I don’t know... when you went to the loo?”

“Oh! You ugly prat!”

“See?” Harry asked Charlie, who was still looking at them with wide open eyes. “One second you are strong, clever, and cute, and the next, you’re an ugly prat. Truly...”

Ginny laughed, and Harry encircled her waist again, before muttering something in her ear, and she giggled again.

Looking at Charlie, she spoke to Harry. “Do you think we can wake him up, now?”

“I don’t know, let’s try.” taking a quill from the desk, he pointed it and mocked an actual incantation. “Enervate!” Bending toward Charlie’s face, he said “See? Ain’t work.”

Looking at the still dumbfounded face of Charlie, both of them laughed good-naturedly.

The man was far from being dumb, but the quick succession of shocks had pushed him in the state where he couldn’t react quickly enough. Recognizing this, the teens stepped aside and started to speak to themselves quietly, giving him some time to recover. When Charlie was done parsing everything that had been thrown to him, he slowly turned toward the muttering couple.

“Ginny?”

Both of them stopped their discussion and turned toward him, smiling.

“Yes?” answered Ginny.

“Is this all true?”

For his answer, she bent toward his arm and pinched him. Hard.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“Are you dreaming?”

“No! Obviously!”

“So it’s true.”

Charlie then looked at Harry. “I should apologize about my earlier attack, then, and-”

Harry extended his arms. “No need, Charlie.”

“-and,” continued the man, “I should also thank you for giving me my current dragon Mate.”

Harry smiled again. “No bother, Charlie. Truly, Norbert is better here than in Hogwarts.”

“True, true.”

A comfortable silence settled in the room, before the door quietly opened and three redheads entered the room. Ron was displaying a contented smile, and the twins were rolling a strange-looking filament.

“Harry, dear friend!” started Fred.

“Best Seeker in a century!” continued George.

At George’s words, Charlie looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. Harry was blushing, and mumbled “Youngest, George. Not the best.”

The twins didn’t give enough time for Charlie to comment on this, as Fred spoke again.

“Why didn’t you warn us about your presence?” he asked.

They finished together. “We would have organized a big party!”

“Sorry, mate.” spoke Ron. “I couldn’t prevent them from using their latest invention.”

The twins beamed.

“What is it?” asked Harry.

They looked at each other, and answered together again.  
“Extendable Ears!”

“Allow you to listen behind doors...” started Fred again.

“...and can even pass walls or privacy charms...”

“...although only low-level charms and wooden walls.”

“Were you listening on us?” asked Ginny in disbelief.

The twins recoiled, suddenly remembering some of Ginny’s infamous outbursts, where she could be as frightening than their mother.

“Well, it’s still in the development stage...” said George.

“...we are testing it, and nobody was home apart a silent Ron and you...”

“...and when we were ready to leave, Ron arrived and opened the door.”

“Nobody else is home?” asked Harry, visibly relieved about something.

“No.” answered Ron. “But you will have to notify our parents someday soon, or mum will kill you.” Noticing Harry’s wince at Molly’s obvious future reaction to the news, Ron also added. “Besides, if you didn’t want to tell mum and dad, there was no need to inform Charlie.”

“Hey!” exclaimed said brother. “I like being kept in the loop, too.”

“Well...” interjected Ginny, “Harry’s information loop being tightly related to his death, no wonder he doesn’t want everyone to know.”

“Yes,” added Harry, “I already didn’t like the press, I can’t even start to imagine the stories they would make about me. Low profile, is all I want now.”

“Still, why did you tell Charlie?” asked Fred.

“We could have used you as token money or prank material.” completed George, looking up in calculation.

Harry and Charlie reacted at the same time. Each aiming at one twin, they slapped the boys’ shoulder. “You prats!”

They all laughed then, at the twins’ display of falsely deadly wounds. Unnoticed from the others, Fred and George were really wincing in pain, as Charlie, although not as tall as them, had packed quite a punch on Fred, and Harry had made George stumble as well.

They continued to discuss lightly, Harry orienting the chat towards dragons and Charlie being happy to speak about them. After a long moment, Ron suddenly looked toward the doorway pointedly. They all quieted, and heard the entrance door opening and the Weasley parents entering the house. At everyone’s questioning look, Harry nodded to them. Ginny left the room and headed for the living room, followed by her siblings, while Harry stayed in the stairway.

“Mum, dad?”

“Yes, dear?”

“I have something to tell you... and...” she hesitated.

“Well, go on darling.” said Molly. “You know you can tell us everything.”

Taking in the twins’ unusually serious expression, Arthur asked “It isn’t something bad, is it?”

“No, no. But you should sit down.” After they complied, she continued. “Remember when Harry died?”

Molly, sensing the return of a sore topic, went to get up, intending to comfort her daughter, but Ginny extended her hand.

“Let me finish, please? What I want to say is quite difficult.” She didn’t tell them that it would be more difficult to hear than for her to say, given that she had already spent a long time with him.

“Well, I wasn’t convinced that he had died, and the Daily Prophet had also reported that the remains were so burnt that the muggles couldn’t identify him, and that there was no remaining magic, thus making the body unidentifiable.” Despite the uneasiness of the conversation, she had brought her parents where she wanted: questioning Harry’s death. The next step will be easier now. Getting to the door, she opened it. “Allow me to reintroduce you to my boyfriend... Harry Potter.” And said boy entered the room.

Harry spent a short time with the Weasleys as a group, and told them as much as he could about his year of absence, without telling anything about his newfound abilities. They were happy to see him again, and especially so as the youngest Weasley seemed quite taken by him. However, Harry saw in Charlie and the parents’ eyes that there were many things they wanted to know. It didn’t take a Seer to guess which ones. How did he succeed in recovering his memory? How did he arrive in Romania? Was he an animagus?

Even if the last question was quite the rhetoric one for Charlie, because he had seen the owl on Ginny’s shoulder, the Dragon Mate and the Weasley parents, felt uneasy enough not to ask embarrassing questions. Especially when, later, Harry seemed to disappear for whole days, Ginny telling them not to worry. Even if that wasn’t true, the young girl made them understand that Harry needed the relaxation provided by the forest. However, it wasn’t entirely false either, because Harry spent a large amount of time in the trees, watching the dragons move and interact. He went there as an owl, and morphed back into a human, before drawing the different dragon species in great detail.

He would then come back in the evening, before going to sleep in Ron's room, like in the old days. However, the move was only to ease the older Weasleys, because Harry never spent the night there. He and Ginny had decided to spend the night in his hideaway, thus spending three days together in there while the outside world slept obliviously. The nights they slept there, they passed them in their own bed. Even if they liked it very much, sleeping together wasn't something they wanted to do regularly yet. In these times, they read, cuddled, and he practised his control over Lightning, as well as his new dragon form, while explaining her the basics of shape-shifting. Harry wasn't always around the dragon reserve, too. One of his days of absence was when Harry returned to Luna. After telling her about his experience with the electricity sphere, she was concerned for a bit, but agreed on his explanation. After all, the very first time he had tried to control his elemental power, he had had the most output from his feelings for Ginny.

"Good, Harry. You seem to understand your element better, now that you are able to see it. If you can, try to use your other senses, too. What seems interesting is your ability to actually see into peoples' brain. You see, as a standard Air elemental, I'm only able to hear unguarded thoughts, only Air Masters are able to modify peoples' thoughts. Sorry to tell you that, but you're barely trained, and still, you succeed in seeing Ginny's nervous system, you said? Quite impressive."

She reflected for a few minutes, while Harry was trying to contain his blush.

"My guess," she continued, "is that, with training, you could see or even modify precise thoughts, and even play on nerves, to inflict or diminish a feeling."

Remembering his first courses in Defence Against the Dark Arts and the short lecture about the Unforgivables, but barely believing that he had that power now, he whispered "Like... like pain?"

"Yes, but not only." At his inquiring glance, she continued. "With training, you could inflict a specific feeling. Pain, of course, even if I'd

rather you not do that.” Looking straight at him, she muttered “But also... pleasure.”

His eyes wide, he could only blush while stammering a brief sentence about him not doing that soon.

“You know,” started Luna again, “you could train on me, I don’t care.”

After a few more uncomfortable seconds, she giggled. “I guess you don’t want to do that soon. Pity.”

They spent what remained of the day training his control over his element, and his resistance to mind probing. The control training was focused on absorbing more and more power, so that he wouldn’t be trapped by another great ball of electricity. His mental resistance was tutored in the two ways they knew of: wizarding and elemental, although the former was difficult to test, Luna not having practical knowledge in Legilimency. However, they both read several interesting passages from books on the subject, and Harry started to concentrate his mind on building a defensive membrane around it. His few biology classes had helped him finding this analogy, because he didn’t like the concept of building a wall. Walls are breakables, and one can fly over it and dig under it. Walls also restrict one’s freedom of movement. Cell membranes were all around the defended cell, blocked unwanted entries, adapted themselves to threats, and still allowed interaction with the outside world.

At the end of the day, Harry knew that his previous amateurish mind sorting had been interesting but insufficient. The imagined paddocks herding his thought had been revisited and refined so that he could access them faster. He left Luna with a feeling of advancing in his knowledge of himself, but with a monstrous headache as well.

Arthur Weasley, being Minister of Magic, had taken only one week of vacation, and he took his leave of his family the same day Harry was at Luna’s. The remaining family enjoyed the stay as much as they could, since, apart watching the dragons, they had next-to-nothing to do. The surrounding forest was quiet and offered only a few clearings for family picnics or romantic encounters. Except Ginny, none of the

Weasleys had their significant other around though, and they were too old to enjoy more than one family picnic outing.

The twins were getting visibly bored, and that wasn't a good thing. Noticing her sons' state, Molly remembered the last time the two pranksters had gotten bored with a pained smile. Sure, the Burrow had been freed from garden gnome for a long time, but they also had had to rebuild half of it afterwards. That's why, one morning, she privately spoke to Charlie.

"Charlie?"

"Mum?"

They were outside, near the house door, and Charlie had been on the verge of leaving to tend to his dragon. Sensing that the talk was serious, he walked back a few steps.

"What is it, mum?"

"Fred and George are bored, Charlie."

"Uh oh."

"Exactly. As the return portkey won't activate for another week, unless we want a destroyed building soon, we have to provide some activities. I had my share of forest picnics, and I wanted if there was possible sightseeing route around. The post office told me that only the Dragon Keepers were allowed to go further than the town borders."

"That's true, mum. The forest seems quiet, but if you leave the well-travelled paths and clearings, it can be quite dangerous. The ground isn't flat, and many creatures live in there, most of them quite dangerous for us, mere humans. You see, dragons are carnivorous, and the forest is the reserve's hunting grounds. They are also playful and powerful, and they like their meal to... defend itself. Sorry about that."

“What can we do, then?”

Charlie reflected for a few seconds, before his eyes lit up. “I think there could be an interesting day trip for everybody. You see, the dragons living around the town are the adult ones. The young ones live in the nests, situated high in the Carpathian mountain range. As Dragon Mate, I can accompany Norbert when he goes back there, and...” he looked pensive for a moment.

“Yes?”

“I think that, given the size of the fleet, we all can visit the place together. Of course, the twins will have to get a grip on themselves during that day.”

“That’d be great, Charlie. When do you think we can go?”

“I will ask to the Elder today, and we could go tomorrow.”

“Is there anything to prepare for the day?”

“Apart from a picnic and your wands, nothing.”

“Our wands?”

“Of course. It’s wilderness over there, and you never know when you’ll need it.”

She hugged him motherly. “Thank you, Charlie.”

“You’re welcome, mum. I should be ashamed not to have thought about it by myself.”

“Come on! Well... we’ll see you this evening?”

“Of course.”

“See you, then.”

“See you.”

Molly Weasley, mother of a large brood of fire-headed children, looked at her son leaving for his daily job, still not at ease with the inherent danger of it. Charlie was an adult now, she reflected, before sighing and returning into the house.

“Weeeeeeeee!”

“Yippee!”

Charlie smiled, as Fred and George whooped in joy. Sure, you don't go on a dragon's back everyday. Charlie himself had made that trip, several years ago, and that had been the impulsion he had needed to find his current job. He had never regretted it. Especially now that he had a Mate to take care of. Turning around, he verified that the flock was following.

There had been five dragons scheduled to visit the nests, and each one was equipped with a 2-person saddle. There were five Weasleys remaining, too, which allowed all of them to visit the mountain range. Charlie had dispatched one member of his family per dragon.

With a smile, Charlie remembered that he had been sad for Harry not being able to spend the day with them until he had noticed the owl flying high above them. Remembering his first encounter with the teenager, he had smirked at a blushing Ginny, before taking off, leading the flight formation.

Once at the Ridgeback nests, mid-slope of a high mountain, the other Weasleys dismounted, and the riders told them they'd be visiting their mount's species' nests too, returning in the afternoon. Molly thanked them, wanting them to accept one of her famous cakes, but they took the air before the situation could worsen.

“Okay people.” started Charlie, before noticing the snow owl nearby. ‘He should work on that,’ he thought, ‘he's too much recognizable.’

He looked around again, taking in the buzz of activity around the food hampers. Noticing that Molly and the twins were occupied, and expecting Ginny and Ron to know about it, he looked straight at the owl and gestured to it. Said owl comically turned its head around in a very human-like move, before reluctantly flying over to Ginny's shoulder. Charlie then took Ginny by the other shoulder and pushed around a nearby rock outcropping. To her surprise, he then spoke directly at the owl.

"Harry, you can transform back, I won't say anything about that. If mum asks about our number, I'll tell her something."

Ginny looked at him with awe in her eyes. "Thank you, brother."

They hugged, while the owl landed and transformed back into Harry. "Thank you, brother." he repeated, and hugged Charlie as well.

"Now, now," Charlie answered, "you should work your discretion ability. I noticed you since our departure."

"Easy for you." Harry answered. "I didn't know your destination, so I had to fly close, but not too close to be eaten. Life as an owl is quite difficult, I'll have you know."

Ginny took his arm at that moment. "At least, you can fly. Some people don't have wings."

"What do you mean, Ginny? Of course people can't fly." interjected Charlie. "But you said it as if... as if you could have had..."

Ginny blushed and Harry muttered "Uh oh..."

"What?" Charlie was beginning to get confused again.

"Better show him, Gin." said Harry.

She nodded. "Brace yourself for the view, brother." And she transformed into her mountain lioness form.

While she made a few playful jumps around, Harry explained to the flabbergasted brother about the fact that the others knew about her already but they didn't have the time to tell him. While he was speaking, though, the feline Ginny came behind him and grasped the sketchpad which protruded from his rear pocket. While they were playfully chasing each other, a hunt Harry was bound to lose, as he didn't want to transform into anything there, the others walked around the ledge and looked at the scene with mixed feelings. The twins were ecstatic at witnessing their sister's form again. Ron was smiling in his usual way, and Molly was worried about the kids chasing each other on the mountain's flanks. After two more minutes, Harry borrowed Charlie's wand and summoned his sketchpad back to him with a carefully-aimed Accio. Ginny transformed back and returned to the others, pouting. She knew that Harry didn't want to transform in his own lion shape while in plain view of the others, contrarily to what they had done in the forest a few times before, and merely kissed him on the cheek. At the same time, Charlie noticed the content of the sketchpad and gasped.

"Harry! Is this what I think it is?"

The called teenager had made a move to hide the drawing book again, but it was too late, now. Reluctantly, he looked at Charlie. "Yes."

Taking the proffered sketchpad, Charlie was surprised by the quality of the drawings. "You know, there are some dragon books with many pictures in the Keepers' library." At Harry's expectant look, he laughed. "Of course, I'll lend some to you. Your drawings could rival with these, though. Where did you learn to draw?"

"Well..." Harry was uneasy, but he had to say something, and he decided to go as close to the truth as possible. "I discovered that I liked to draw in the elapsed year. I often had dreams about my past and by drawing them, I could remember things."

The Weasleys looked at him sympathetically, something he would have scowled upon if it had been anyone else.

“Now, I occupy my mind with drawing things from the places I go. I like drawing creatures, especially complex ones. This one book is full of dragons.” he finished, pointing to the book that Charlie was browsing.

After another ten minutes of discussion on the subject, they finally entered one of the numerous caves leading to the mountains’ inside. The rest of the day passed without any incident, as they descended until finding the caves with the eggs and hatchling dragons. After tending them under the watchful gaze of the parents, they cleaned the caves of the young ones, and went back up around one in the afternoon, to find a beautiful crater lake. Even if the trip wasn’t prepared, they had their wands, and transfigured some of their own clothing into swimming suits, before spending the rest of the afternoon playing water games.

Draco Malfoy was angry. There wasn’t much he could do about it, though. He had already killed two house elves and all the manor’s owls in his fury accesses in the previous month, and the remaining small creatures avoided him like a plague.

He didn’t even know why he was angry, though, and it was infuriating him even more.

In his rare moments of sanity, he reflected that he was slowly going mad. He tried to Floo to Hogwarts to ask Dumbledore for his help, but his connection had been shut down, and he didn’t remember doing it. He couldn’t send an owl either because he didn’t have any more.

After several weeks of ranting in the empty corridors, he decided to leave the place to go to Hogwarts on foot. Once in the surrounding woods, though, he didn’t know where he was, because he had always used the Floo or portkeys to enter Malfoy Manor.

He spent a whole week ambling in the forest, where he lost his wand, until he found a well-travelled road. In his dishevelled state, nobody took him, though, and he continued to err until a police car noticed him. As he couldn’t even tell them his name, they took him to the

local hospital to be taken care of. His magic was going haywire too, though, and the Ministry finally noticed the surges of accidental magic.

A team of Aurors removed him from the muggle hospital, obviating the doctors in the process, and they took him to St Mungo, where he was identified thanks to his magical signature, despite its skewed state.

After a few days, he was recognized by a Death Eater spy working there, and Voldemort organized a 'rescue' team to bring him back. Draco Malfoy had uncovered a large number of prominent Death Eaters the previous summer, and Voldemort wanted to take 'care' of him. Personally.

After portkeying back to England, Arthur Weasley went back to his office, wary of the mountains of work he suspected. And he was right. Even with delegating as much work as possible, the Minister had the last word in most important decisions, and a two-foot high pile of reports sitting on his oaken desk awaited his approval.

He sighed and started to work.

At the end of his first day of work, he had answered a full foot of reports from the pile, but it had also grown during the day, and Arthur felt forced to stay in his office to reduce the awaiting work.

Nobody waited for him at home, though; not even Percy. They had taken a quick meal together, his son informing him about the general atmosphere in the Ministry. Percy had also told him, while blushing profusely, about the fact that he was staying at his girlfriend's place. His son being of age, Arthur had agreed about it, but not without nagging for a few details about her. Penelope Clearwater had been a Ravenclaw in Percy's year, and they had started to date since their fifth year. She was now working in the Creatures Department with Percy, and the two of them had been promised to a brilliant future.

Sighing, the Minister of Magic got himself a cognac and sipped on it while reflecting about his descendants for a while. Bill had been dead for two months now, but the pain of his loss hadn't been reduced, especially as they didn't have a body to bury. The Weasleys had

been quite lucky during Voldemort's first rise, not losing a child despite their pureblood status and closeness to Dumbledore. That didn't lessen their hurt as well.

Charlie was happy working with dragons, but, apparently, wasn't seeing anyone. Percy was as good as engaged and on the right track to advance well in the Ministry. The twins would always place fun before love, he thought, and as such, would have problems finding a mate. Ron was having one, but Arthur couldn't be sure of their sentiments toward each other. And Ginny...

Ginny had Harry, who had come back from the dead a few weeks ago. Frowning, Arthur sipped some more of his drink, remembering the few chats they had had. The boy had been self-assured, a lot more than when he had seen him right before his second year. He had also been short and to the point, on the limit of curtness, as if he actually didn't want to spill his secrets to them. Arthur and Molly, though, had discussed about it together and noticed a few loopholes in his speech. The morning following their first discussion, they had wanted to ask him about those, but Ginny had sensed their inquiring mind and had quickly dissuaded them before Harry climbed down the stairs.

Arthur shook his head. Not only did he know next to nothing to Harry's miraculous resurrection, but Harry had also asked them not to discuss about him with the Order. Even if he didn't say the whole name, they understood that he was speaking about the Order of the Phoenix. Unbeknownst to everyone, Harry had made several trips to his vault to bring family papers to his hideaway, and had begun to sift through them during his time-enlarged nights. He wasn't done, though, because it was a great large stack of boring papers. Several of them had drawn his attention, as they were letters between his parents and other people, and they were talking about some Order. It hadn't been until he had read half the pile of letters, learning more about his parents' relationships with other people, that he finally found one full wording for the Order of the Phoenix.

Molly and Arthur had hidden their surprise at him knowing about it, and nodded. He had been on the verge of asking them to swear on it, but Ginny had restrained him, and both her parents understood

through the youngsters' gazes that they were very much in love. It hadn't prevented Molly to be her usual self, preparing a room for Harry to sleep in, and forbidding night strolls.

The current Minister of Magic smiled at his reminiscence of his wife's temperament, before finishing his glass and returning to his work.

After several minutes into it, a feeling of recognition struck him when he read one of the papers. Digging through the stack of already signed papers, he extracted three other forms with the same content. Apparently, the service issuing them had repeated the deed once a day. With this in mind, he searched through the stack of yet-untreated papers, and found the expected copies for the other days of his leave. He grouped them, and read their content, his curiosity raised. However, his curiosity wasn't to be quenched by the short message.

It was a request for his presence to treat an immediate, but unspecified, problem. He hated when the Unspeakables couldn't express clearly what they wanted. He looked at the clock and noticed the time. 2am. He put the eight similar forms on the side of his desk, intending to go there in the morning, and attacked the remaining papers with a vengeance.

Three hours afterwards, he was soundly asleep on a law amendment request issued by the Department of Transportation.

He slept soundly and got woken up by the smell of freshly grounded coffee. The beverage wasn't one of his favourite, but his secretary knew that, after a night like this, he had to be up and about as quickly as possible.

Arthur thanked her, before finishing his stack of work, thankfully only including a dozen reports now. He then took the eight similar requests and headed for the Department of Mysteries.

He was welcomed by a mere nod from a silent figure in the department lobby. Arthur knew that the Unspeakables weren't answering to the Minister, but it still annoyed him that someone could be so disrespectful to him. Walking swiftly, the Unspeakable directed him through dark corridors, to a quite empty room.

Once there, the caped person closed the door before turning toward him.

“I’m sorry about my previous lack of explanation, Minister, but we have come across a difficult case, and only you can help us solve it.”

This was his usual job as Minister, so Arthur nodded gravely. “What can I do? Can you show me the case?”

“Of course.” Even through the voice disguise, the smile was unmistakable. Turning toward the only visible item of furniture of the room, a desk, the Unspeakable removed a tissue from atop something that Arthur recognized immediately.

A pensieve. The Department of Mysteries’ usual work tool.

“Just make this memory yours.” asked the man.

Said pensieve was almost empty, which was the case when only few memories were in it, and Arthur didn’t think twice about it, while bringing the greyish memory to his temple. What happened next was strange. He felt himself thrown in a dark corridor, moved around, and dropped on a stone surface. When he looked around, he could only notice that he was alone in a very large tub. Looking up, however, brought a surprised yell, as he saw his own face looking down at him. He didn’t understand what had happened and concentrated, as if trying to exit a pensieve-induced vision. It didn’t work, though. After a while, he felt the stony tub moving around, and noticed huge hands holding the sides of the tub. He then started to realize what had happened, understanding that he was actually in the pensieve, now.

Arthur Weasley yelled like never before, refusing his fate. He was thankful when the stony tub stopped moving, but started to feel real terror when it started to tilt. When he slid from the upended basin, the current Minister felt that his last moment had begun. However, he wasn’t to die soon, as he first landed in what appeared to be a greyish sea. He was quickly submerged by said sea, and then remarked that the sea was made of other spirits like him. Like

Broderick Bode before him, Arthur Weasley wasn't used to fighting in these circumstances, and was swiftly kicked to the bottommost part of the barrel.

The Hell.

To be continued in next chapter: Cooking Lessons...

T'was not time for vacations  
Even if they saw dragons.  
What is it with the barrel?  
You'll see, review, send a roll.

## Chapter 34 – Cooking Lessons

In these first days of July, the weather was unforgiving.

It was hot.

But tourists still went to the beaches. Vacation time near Thessalonica was always the same. For Hermione and Megan, though, it was one of their most relaxed moments. Both of them had changed from their usual holiday schemes. The years before, Hermione was always pushing her parents to visit places in her thirst of knowledge. Megan and her had always been single children, and the fact that they would spend their vacation together was strange, and refreshing, for both of them.

“See this one?” asked Megan. “He’s far gone already.”

Hermione giggled, a totally un-Hermione sound. “Yeah, he’s got to get it! He’s got to get it!”

A monumental slap resounded on the crowded beach, as an angry woman left a dumbfounded man to sit on the sand.

Hermione and Megan looked at each other and spoke at the same time. “He’s got it.” And they erupted in laughter.

The two girls were practising one of the most universally played games, especially on beaches: commenting. As it was, they were now watching the young men trying to seduce the female population of the beach, and were commenting their luck, and lack thereof.

As they had pushed their parents to spend the vacations together, said parents were relaxed too, as they didn’t have their only child to entertain anymore. Hermione and Megan spent their days switching from the beach to the hotel pool, with an occasional educational visit thrown in between. After all, it was still their first trip to Greece. Sometimes, Megan asked about her brother and her family, and Hermione answered to the best of her knowledge, even if said knowledge was limited by what Harry himself had known about his own family during his first years. They had grown closer in a few days

than in the whole school year, and both secretly hoped that their friendship would continue the following year.

“Hey, Meg.”

“Yes, Herm?”

“There goes another one.”

The two girls returned to their activity, unaware of the pink-haired woman nearby, lying so as to tan her back, and smiling in the crook of her arm.

Cardiff, that Sunday morning...

“Harder, Harry. Harder.”

“I’m... trying...”

“Hold it... Hold it... Now!”

An explosion of light occurred in the secluded garden of Elijah Lovegood’s house. Luna was training Harry in the handling of his element, while Harry had to maintain his elemental vision at the same time. Doing this, Harry had a better understanding of his element, and was attaining a higher goal after each exercise.

After juggling with lightning spheres for a while, Harry learned to dissipate his power harmlessly, either doing nothing, or by displaying fantastic forms in ephemeral lightning. After eating with Luna’s father, they then exited to Harry’s refuge, where they would practise some more. Now that he could disperse his energy safely, he had reflected, they could spend a longer time working in there.

And spend a long time they did. Harry wanted to insulate his mind so as not to be prone to mental attacks from anyone, whether it is Elementals, Death Eaters, Aurors, or even Dumbledore. To do that, he had to train his mind resistance more and more, which they did for a full day in his refuge. While only three hours elapsed outside, the

two teens worked on this for eight hours straight, slept there, and continued for another eight-hour stretch afterwards. Needless to say, Harry was quite tired at the end, but he was now able to block her attempts quite successfully. His passive defence could block her even without concentrating, and her active defence could eject her in mere seconds. While they were eating their midday meal, Luna asked him something that had been bothering her for some time already.

“Harry, what is the shape of your mind protection?”

“What do you mean?”

“The few wizards I met who had a mind protection had envisioned it like a wall. You didn’t.”

“Well... each wizard can think of anything he wants as protection, right?”

“Yes, and?”

“And when you meet such a wizard with a mind wall, what do you do to get past his protection?”

“I fly over... oh!”

“Exactly. I wanted something protecting me from all sides. On top of that, I also wanted something self-repairing, and from which I could also interact with the outside world. The problem with a wall is that it restrains the attacked wizard inside his mind.”

“What was it? I never saw something similar anywhere. Looked like a gelatinous blob.”

“I won’t have much trouble from non-muggleborn wizards, then. That was a cell.”

“A... a cell? What is it?”

“Every living creature is made of billions of cells, Luna. Muggles learn that in school, in a class called Biology. Cells are self-sufficient gelatinous blobs which are protected from the outside world by a membrane. What you saw is the membrane I protected my mind with.”

“Protection from every angle, allows interaction... Interesting...”

“You know, there is more to it. I have read more about cells, and I know that some have self-defence mechanisms intended to render the membrane acidic in case of attacks. As soon as I can include this, I’ll be able to use a passive defence to counter-attack mind intrusions.” He grew thoughtful, his fork in mid-air. “I wonder what acid could do to a mind...”

“In any way, you’ve grown out of my league.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t teach you anything else, the most I can do is continue being thrown out of your mind every few seconds or so. What I could do, though, is introduce you to Joshua Ch’larwen.”

Harry looked up. “Who is he?”

“It’s one of the Air Masters in London; he is responsible for the branch of elementals modifying peoples’ memories when an elemental surge occurs. He holds much political power. And he’s one of the few Air Magiuses.”

“You’d do that?” He sounded more hopeful than doubtful.

“Yes. Actually, I gave the name to your Fire elemental friend, but I guess the paper got lost since you didn’t know about him.”

“Thank you, Luna! How could I thank you properly?”

“Harry...”

“Yes?”

“...you could destroy Voldemort.”

He looked at her. “What do you mean? I barely escaped with my life each time I met him. I can’t reasonably hope defeating him!”

“Perhaps, but you are stronger, now, aren’t you?”

“Luna! I can’t reasonably think about that! He’s the bloody dark lord!”

“And you’re the Boy-who-Lived.”

“Don’t call me that! It was a fluke, nothing more.”

“Are you sure?”

“What?”

“Are you sure it was a fluke? Or don’t you think that your instinct of survival launched an elemental surge?”

“I don’t know! I-”

“...and don’t you think that by training you sufficiently, you could take him on?”

“Honestly, Luna, I don’t know!”

“I prefer this.”

“What?”

“You don’t know, yet. It’s better than your plain refusal. Besides, Trelawney made a prophecy.”

“I remember. So?”

“Well... I think that ‘light true warrior’ referred to you. I’m not a specialist in decrypting prophecies, though. You should ask someone else, someone like professor Dumbledore.”

“Okay. I’ll owl him tomorrow. Meanwhile, how are you going to introduce me to Mr Larwen?”

She giggled. “His name is Ch’larwen. I can communicate with him through the element, when we get out of this place. I don’t think it would be wise to speak with the outside world while our time is accelerated.”

“Well... no, you’re right. London or Cardiff?”

“Let’s take London. If he’s available, it will be faster.”

They straightened themselves up, and portkeyed to Harry’s bedroom at the Freyrs’. Joan and Michael had relocated at the funfair at the beginning of the summer term, and the house was empty.

“Nice.” said Luna, before sitting in the bed, taking his head in her hands.

“ Thanks.” whispered Harry. He didn’t want to interrupt her discussion, and sat near the window, looking outside. It was already late in the afternoon, but the summer sun was warming the surroundings.

He was watching the neighbours coming back to whatever family outing they went when Luna spoke again, surprising him.

“Okay.”

He turned to her. “Okay what?”

“He finished his day, and will meet us now.”

“Where?”

“Oh! It’s their main headquarters. It’s funny, because it’s not that far from Diagon Alley. I don’t know how much time it is via the underground, though.”

“Don’t fret about that, I have Diagon Alley memorized.”

“Okay. Let’s go, then?”

“Let’s. Just a moment.”

He concentrated, and took on a different appearance. Tanned complexion, long brown hair, and blue eyes. She held his ring, and he portkeyed them both in Diagon Alley. The alley was quite quiet, the heated pavement being a reminder of the day’s average temperature. They left through the Leaky Cauldron, towards Muggle London, and walked a few streets until they reached their destination.

Coventry Street wasn’t far from the Leaky Cauldron, and the upscale buildings there didn’t imply any vows of secrecy from their inhabitants. Harry looked at Luna questioningly, but she merely smiled and entered one of them. After passing three doors and two guard shifts, they finally arrived in a large office where a thin man in his sixties was having an animated conversation at the telephone.

“No! You know, as well as I know, that you don’t want the job.”

“ ... ”

“I already posted the notices. But-”

“ ... ? ”

“If you want. Feel free to apply. I’m not reading that mail, you know, so I can’t help you.”

“ ... ! ”

“Stop ranting, Mark, it won’t help!”

“ ... ”

“That’s it. Bye.”

Joshua Ch’larwen, whose name was written on the door and on several muggle diplomas on the wall, hung up, stood up and shook their hands.

“Hey! Luna Lovegood! It has been quite a long time, isn’t it?”

“Half an hour, Mr Ch’larwen.”

“Still that sense of humour! And didn’t I tell you to stop calling that way?” the man laughed, patting her back before turning toward Harry. “And who might you be, young man?”

Harry was disguised with his usual Gabriel attire: spiked black hair and ruddy eyes. “I’m Gabriel Swift, sir.” he said, shaking the man’s hand.

“Luna here told me that you were a Magius, but she didn’t elaborate.”

Harry felt drawn by the man’s eyes, but the open door behind him did upset his sense of privacy. Before he could say anything, though, the man laughed.

“Don’t be afraid. The Air around the door prevents overhearing. Can you hear the rustle outside?”

Harry tried to listened, through the open door, the noise of the people outside, but found that there was complete silence. His doubts quieted, he turned back toward the man.

“I’m a wizard, and I learnt a short time ago that I was a Lightning Magius.”

“Lightning?” the man’s eyebrows shot towards his bald forehead.

“As in... Lightning, sir.” Harry smiled.

“Can you demonstrate? Or are you Untrained?”

For his answer, Harry held his hand in front of his chest, hiding from the door and the outside people, and summoned sparks around his hand. After dismissing them, he added “I have very little training, though. Luna helped because I didn’t stop messing with accidental surges.”

“I hope that you reined your emotions, now. It wouldn’t be good to make this building explode.”

Harry smiled guiltily. “Yes, sir.”

“Now, if Luna trained you, what do you want?”

“Actually, Luna was the first to inform me of everything, but someone else trained me first.”

“Ah? Who?”

“The father of a friend of mine, Tamara O’Malley. I don’t remember his first name, though.”

“WHO?” The man had been so easy-going since the beginning of the discussion that his tone of voice surprised the two teenagers.

“Mr O’Malley, sir. Why...” started Harry, before the man stopped him by raising his hand.

His eyes narrowed towards the door, his lips reduced to a thin line, he spoke slowly. “Speaking of the devil...”

Harry turned around swiftly, but a sudden pain in his forehead made him fall back in his seat, unconscious.  
Voldemort's cottage...

The ranks of black-robed wizard and witches swayed back and forth, chanting a strange incantation in guttural tones. In the middle of the room, a blood pentagram was drawn on the floor. Several braziers, scattered around the room, were emitting a crimson smoke. And two men were discussing behind the room's doors.

"I tell you not to do it, we have more urgent matters to treat."

"It's too late, O still-nameless ally." The sarcasm was dripping from Voldemort hissing voice. "My faithful followers have already begun the summoning chant. Besides, I know that the only thing you want is the Ministry. Still, as long as I don't know why, I won't dedicate my fighting forces to a desperate cause."

"I don't want the Ministry down! I want an item from there! It's like a pensieve, only larger..."

"How do you know it's there? It could have been relocated in Gringotts, or even with this old fool Dumbledore?"

"No, I can feel it. I need it, and I need it soon, or..."

"Or?"

The man's voice lowered suddenly. "Or the consequences may be dire."

Voldemort's normally slanted nostrils flared. "Is it a threat? Are you threatening me?"

"No! I didn't speak about you. I spoke about-"

"Well! If it's the same to you, I have a summoning to achieve. And if it isn't, you can shove off, I don't need you."

At these words, Voldemort entered the incensed room, making sure to slam the doors in his wizened and still-unknown ally, which spoke darkly. “Youngsters...”

The current dark lord thumped his way through his followers, stopping only when in front of the pentacle. Reading from a levitating book, he spoke the last verse of the ancient incantation, and the inside of the pentacle seemed to disappear slowly, to be replaced by a pentagon of blackness, so dark that it seemed to attract the nearby light.

Voldemort sensed a panic somewhere in his mind, but he didn't have time to investigate as he had still work to do. Still chanting, he directed his wand towards an unconscious muggle young woman, who had been abducted from the nearby village. Levitating her, he placed her on top of the black pentagon, head down. The girl had been chosen for her spotless appearance, as well as her virginity. As if on cue, every Death Eater cast a Cutting curse on her, and she started to bleed from the multiple wounds. As soon as blood started to fall in the black pentagon, a rumble started to shake the room. In the middle of the ordeal, she woke up, and started to trash about until one of the black-robed wizards cast a petrificatus on her. After a few minutes, there was no more blood to drop, and the dead body was thrown haphazardly against a wall. Voldemort was satisfied of the ritual's progress, but a deep rumbling voice suddenly echoed through the room, bringing him back to the reality.

“Moooooooooooooooooooooooooooo...”

He looked around, on the verge of panic. The book had said one virgin, not two! The hooked demon must be powerful to haggle even before being there, he thought. Looking around his Death Eaters, he quickly assessed if there could be one to help him. He didn't know his followers' love life, though, and could only ask.

“Who is still a virgin among you?”

The Death Eaters looked at each other. For the ceremony, they hadn't put their masks on, as it served mainly to hide from the outside

world, and it also prevented correct speech. After Voldemort's question, though, a few young women from the followers' ranks felt that it would have been a good idea, as they brothers, friends, or other acquaintances designated them. Some of them even cursed the pureblood education that had pushed them to avoid sex before marriage.

The five of them couldn't do anything when most of the surrounding Death Eaters, men as well as women, cursed them with the petrificatus and brought them to the Dark Lord. Voldemort looked at them, and, without warning, cursed the one who had appeared the most reluctant. If they aren't ready to sacrifice themselves, he thought, they're going to be sacrificed. He smiled at his own humour while magically removing the strips of clothing from the intended victim. He then levitated her and repeated the steps leading to her death. All in all, the dark lord was having fun. It didn't lessen the impression of panic in the back of his mind, though, but he would take care of this afterwards.

Now was the time.

Exhilarated, he motioned to his followers to start the chant again, and they proceeded while he shouted the incantation louder and louder. The whole room started to shake under the power of the summoned demon. The stones around the pentacle crackled, but the magic of the ritual held the structure together. This pentacle was the base of the summoning as it provided a prison for the summoned fiend.

The demon's head slowly appeared from the drawn figure, and the witnesses gasped. Some of the youngest Death Eaters passed out, while others blanched or released internal fluids. The head itself was as large as the five-sided figure. Voldemort himself widened his eyes in wonder at the beast's size, and the panic at the back of his mind intensified. However, the dark lord knew about demons, and knew what would happen next.

The demon, noticing the difference in size between himself and his prison, reduced his own size to fit. It was a tight fit, and the demon's leathery wings were bent at uncomfortable angles, but it held.

“WhAt dO yOu nEeD fRoM mE?” asked the summoned creature in a rumbling voice.

Voldemort knew that he could ask only one thing between three: power, riches, or a service. He also knew that he had to make another sacrifice depending on what he asked. Before the ritual, he had reflected about it. He didn't think he needed more power for himself, as he was only second to Dumbledore in duelling, and the old man had a century of experience. He didn't need money, because most of his followers were the richest pureblood families of Britain. He wanted a service, though. He wanted his only remaining obstacle down, even if he had to sacrifice a bit of his power in order to do so.

He wanted Dumbledore down.  
Hogwarts...

Albus Dumbledore looked up sharply. He had been discussing school arrangements with Minerva again, when something rang at his peripheral mind. He couldn't place it, though, even when spending several minutes exploring the many contingency spells he had placed on himself during his 150 years of spellcraft.

Sighing, he went back to McGonagall, dismissing the incident to his tired mind, and tried to take the conversation from where it stopped. However, the second he opened his mouth, he saw a pillar of fire erupting from the darkening sky, and striking the ground, making the whole castle rattle.

“What... what was that? Albus? Are they back?”

The old man didn't have time to answer, though, as a rumbling voice, older than the very walls around them, resounded around them.

“aLbUs dUmBIEdOrE!”

McGonagall looked at the window and blanched. “Oh my god!” was the only thing she could utter, before sitting on her seat.

Outside the castle, a mere inch from the wards, a 10-foot tall creature stood in a charred crater. Its leathery wings and horned skull didn't leave much imagination about where it came. What were even more freakish were his four muscular arms as well as the molten lava aspect of his whole body.

Dumbledore suddenly understood the ringing in his mind. 110 years ago, when the fashion was to summon lesser demons to do wizards' every little whim, he placed a contingency spell on himself, warning him when a demon was launched on him. It had helped a few times. When the ministry had restricted the use of demons, he had rejoiced, but forgot to remove the spell. Knowing how demons worked, he had the choice, now. He could hide and try to protect himself in Hogwarts, knowing that the summoned fiend would do his best to find him. Or he could go battle him in the open. Whatever the battle result, the demon wouldn't touch the school. These beasts were always programmed with one target in mind.

Noticing the size and power of the beast, he sighed. He wouldn't be able to save himself. The only thing he could do now, was save the school.

"Minerva... Minerva!"

The bleak tone brought McGonagall to her senses. "Albus?"

Not looking at her, he spoke slowly. "Take care of the school."

"What do you mean... Albus? Albus!" the Headmistress began to fear for her colleague.

"It is here for me, and for me only." he said, his back to her.

She rushed to him frantically. "We'll find a way, we always find a way..." she said, looking around.

"Yes, Minerva. I found a way so that the school's leadership won't be involved in that battle."

“What is-” she started to ask, before noticing the wand aimed at her.

“I’m sorry. Stupefy!”

Dumbledore grasped the crumbling body of the Headmistress, and laid her gently on the couch. Then, looking at the window, he estimated that he had mere seconds before the beast would apply its program, destroying Hogwarts if he wasn’t to show himself. What could he do in mere seconds?

Nothing.

He apparated a dozen yards behind the demon. Even if Hermione quoted Hogwarts: a History time and again, it was possible to Apparate on Hogwarts ground. It just was extremely difficult. But the Headmaster, having all leeway on the wards, was always able to.

Arriving behind the beast, Dumbledore tapped his wand handle on the ground thrice, and it grew to become a gnarled staff, capped with a pulsating sapphire. The dancing light was casting eerie shadows around the former Headmaster, and every witness would have been in awe. That is, if there had been witnesses.

The demon wasn’t in awe.

It had a task.

And it was going to start executing it.  
Coventry Street, London...

Harry woke suddenly, drenched in sweat. Jumping up, he started to rant at the people present.

“We have to warn Dumbledore! Volde-”

He stopped abruptly. His previous moments of wakefulness came back to his mind and he winced. These people weren’t wizards.

However, if everything followed its course, he would have a dead Headmaster in a few moments, minutes, even.

He looked around. He was still in Mr Ch'larwen's office, but its owner had disappeared, as well as Luna. There were three people there: an old woman with white hair and deep blue eyes, clad in a navy blue dress; an athletic man looking in his early forties, with brown hair in a ponytail and brown eyes, dressed in brown overalls; and a young man in his twenties, his red hair recalling Harry of the Weasleys. They had been discussing while he was unconscious, or rather, the redhead discussed while the woman only refuted his sayings, and the other man nodded all along.

Whoever they were, Harry had only one contact here, and it was urgent to find him.

"Where is Luna? And where is Mr Ch'larwen?"

"I don't know who this Luna is, young man," answered the old lady, "but Mr Ch'larwen will find you whenever his current job will allow it."

"You don't understand, I need to find him as soon as poss-"

"You don't understand." started the redhead. "Mr Ch'larwen isn't somebody you can annoy like that."

"I have to find him, it's a matter of life or death!"

"Hmmm hmmm." in his nonchalant way, the athletic man was more unnerving than the two others.

"Somebody is going to die and I NEED HIS HELP!" Harry had shouted the last part, his anger at the three reaching a level where he wasn't mastering his emotions.

The three other gasped.

"That is something new." the woman said.

“I never encountered one.” the redhead replied.

“Hmmm hmmm.” answered the other man.

“Will you answer me, DAMN IT!” Harry exploded, and his energy sphere exploded as well.

To leave the unconscious teen in the quiet, as he suspected a heated discussion, the Air Master had brought his fire colleague three rooms down. Mark O'Malley was here because he wanted the job that had been freed after Joshua's undersecretary's retirement. The two men hated each other with a passion, though, and it could never work out. It was to say this, and exchange several heated arguments about responsibilities, that the two men had isolated themselves.

In the main room, people had been working the end-of-the-day shift, and only a few of them stayed. Those few would have something to tell their colleague the next day, as the door to their boss' office exploded off its hinges. Said boss then ran to the office, followed by a worried Fire Master. Even if he hadn't had time to greet him, especially as he was unconscious, Mark had recognized the young man, and the explosion wasn't a good sign.

Upon arriving in the destroyed office, though, both Masters could only laugh at the sight of the three elementals cowering behind the overturned desk while Harry was ranting. Ranting about...

Joshua looked around in alarm. He quickly placed memory blocks on the four other elementals present, and took Harry by the shoulder.

“What!” the young man was ready to curse again.

“It's me. Calm down. You're calm, now.” The voice, and the subconscious message accompanying it effectively calmed Harry.

“Now. What is it about Dumbledore?” the Air Master had caught the name in Harry's rant and had mentally frozen the others, so as to discuss freely with him. Obviously, it was urgent.

Harry decided to cut short, as he had lost enough time already.  
“Voldemort summoned a demon to kill him.”

“Oh my... How do you know?”

“It’s not the point! I’m sure of it. I’m going to Hogwarts to help him, but I can’t do everything alone. Especially as I don’t have a wand.”

“How can you be a Magius and not have a wand?”

Harry threw him a dark glance, and he understood it wasn’t his main topic of interest right now.

“Okay. When?”

“When what?”

“When is it going to strike?”

“Now! Right now! Can you do something? Are the elementals proficient with demons?”

“Actually... it depends on one’s element. There are...”

“Cut, please.”

“Okay, okay. The most indicated element is magma. It is a mix between-”

“I know what it is.” Harry interrupted curtly. “Are there many available?”

“Unfortunately, no. They are quite rare, like the other intermediate elements. We don’t know why, but intermediate elements seldom transfer to children intact. It always loses-”

“Sorry, but I don’t have time for this. Another idea to fight this beast?”

“I’d say water because the beast works on fire.”

“Okay. I guess there are many of them.”

“Yes, but-”

“You know where Hogwarts is?”

“Yes, but-”

“Can you bring demon fighters there as quickly as possible?”

The young man was feverish, and his fervour was contagious. Joshua Ch’larwen began to think about a battle plan, before Harry shook him.

“Can you?”

“Yes!”

“Thank you. Be quick, I don’t know how much time I can buy. Lakelogliewarts!”

And Harry disappeared. Joshua looked at the spot he had been in shock. That young man, even if he had been able to wreak havoc in his office, wouldn’t be able to fight a demon alone. And he knew it, and he expected his help.

He went to his overturned desk and pulled it upright with a flick of his hand. He then picked a small notepad from this first drawer, and exited the room, heading to the telephone hub, and leaving the four other elementals there, to be dealt with later. If he was to contact several Magiuses at the same time, he needed all the lines he could get.

Harry landed on the usual patch of grass near the lake. Professor Sprout had made the grass grow back where he had burned it a dozen days ago, but new patches of burnt and otherwise damaged ground proved that a battle had started here...

...and the surrounding sound proved that it wasn't finished yet. There was a deep rumbling sound resembling a laughter emitted from an impossibly large throat. There was a deep pounding on the ground as if horses were charging around, only it wasn't horses. There were sounds of battle, as if thousands of soldiers were hacking at each other. There were sounds of magic, the energy crackling in the air, as spells saturated the air in magic. And finally, there was a voice, a formidable, booming voice, which Harry would recognize even in its currently deformed and tired state.

Albus Dumbledore, to fight his adversary on the same ground, had enlarged himself. He had cast several spells on himself to strengthen his robes and his underlying skin. He continued to cast spells on the demon, striking him with his staff sometimes. The demon, however, seemed to heal itself each time, and attacked Dumbledore with renewed vigour.

Harry didn't know since how long it had been going, but the old man was starting to show signs of fatigue. It was time, now.

Harry could fight in two ways. Three, in fact, but, without a proper wand, he couldn't very well cast spells. He could attack with his elemental energy, and he could attack the demon bodily.

Bodily? Was he mad?

In fact, the enlarged Dumbledore had given him the idea of transforming himself into a dragon. After all, this particular transformation was acquired, now. The added bonus was that he could use Lightning while in any form.

Hidden from both fighters, he concentrated and felt the usual tingling in his whole body. After long seconds while his bones grew as well as his muscles, while his skin hardened and fangs and claws elongated, he stood up and took flight immediately. No need to warn the fighters about his presence. Flying on top of the battlefield, he studied Dumbledore tactics, and quickly found a pattern. Attack spell, defence spell, strike with staff. The demon wasn't really affected by

the spells, as they only bought time for Dumbledore so that he could cast his repetitive defence spells. The most damaging was the staff strike, and Harry decided to strike then. While the two fighters continued, he focussed on his current anger and anguish, and summoned a ball of lightning large enough to encompass his present shape, and more. He waited for Dumbledore to cast his defence spell and threw the energy sphere on the demon.

Dumbledore was in his sequence, and he struck with the staff, not really realizing what had happened. When he finally noticed, his eyes grew wide. The creature in front of him was held by a crackling field of energy, barely able to move, and visibly unable to heal the magical staff wound. The energy field was lowering steadily, and he could only make good use of his staff during that time.

While he repeatedly struck the fiend, he also uncorked a vial of potion from his pockets and drank from it. It never had time to do so during the real fight, and was content to be able to do so now, as the strong peppering-up potion kicked in.

While Dumbledore struck the demon, Harry hadn't been inactive too. Noticing that the energy field was dwindling, he prepared another, this time much stronger. He concentrated on everything he held dear. His friends, wizards and muggles... His activities... His discoveries...

...his love.

When he finished concentrating, he had released a ball of lightning so intense that it was entirely white. He hadn't wanted it to be too large because Dumbledore wouldn't be able to strike the beast otherwise. The white ball shed as much light as a little sun, and Dumbledore, still striking the demon, grew alarmed of finding shadows on the ground where there hadn't been before. He looked up, and froze at the sight.

Bad idea.

Harry kicked himself mentally.

He hadn't warned his professor about his presence in the fight. He didn't give him a warning about his miscellaneous powers either. The

only thing that Dumbledore could think of was that there was another power there, another unknown threat. The problem is that his enemy had finished absorbing the energy shield at that moment, and sent its two right fists at the same time.

Harry winced upon hearing the bones cracking and seeing the man flying backwards, but he held on his Lightning ball. He had wanted to throw it in the same way, but the demon was already rushing toward the old wizard's prone form. Not having time to concentrate on sending his energy sphere onto the demon, he plunged toward the demon, his ball in tow.

When the old man opened his eyes, awoken by the ground shaking under him, he was quite shocked of the sight in front of him. Two beasts of legend were fighting each other. The very same demon he had been fighting was incapacitated by a sphere of white light, but that didn't prevent it to strike back, sending spears of searing fire at the dragon between them.

Between them.

The previous Headmaster then understood that the dragon was there to help him, and, while, still lying on the ground, he drank several potions to recover from his fall, he couldn't stop wondering who sent it and why.

While the old man recovered, Harry was trying to push the demon away. He had understood at some point that the demon's one and only goal was Dumbledore's demise, and several tactics couldn't be applied there: if he moved aside trying to lure the beast away, it would lunge at the still lying wizard.

So, the most he could do, like his first hit, was pushing it away. For the umpteenth time, he ran toward it, intending to jump on it. The ground shook, but the demon didn't move away. Demon that powerful didn't fear anything, and wouldn't flee from any attack. However, the sheer inertia of the dragon made it fall on its back again, with more wounds on its torso from the dragon's claws.

Said claws, though, as well as a good part of the dragon's side where the demon had retaliated while falling, were visibly burnt. It wasn't a good idea to tear into a creature made of magma, even while adding Lightning to the strike.

However, under Dumbledore's surprised gaze, the dragon's claws and hide quickly found their normal aspect. Unbeknownst to him, Harry was using his shape-shifting abilities to heal himself. It was tiring him, though, and, panting, he flew back to the spot he was before, right between Dumbledore and the demon.

While standing up again, warily taking hold of his Sorcerer staff, Albus Dumbledore wondered about the creature in front of him. He knew about demons, and he knew about dragons, but he never thought that a dragon would be able to fight such a beast. Even his staff was damaged by the magma creature. He also never witnessed a creature able to regrow their burnt claws and skin as quickly as the one in front of him did. He was thankful, though, for his life would have been forfeit otherwise.

A rumbling growl interrupted his thoughts, and he noticed that the creature programmed to kill him was standing again. This time, however, the incapacitating sphere that restrained it had dwindled to nothing and the creature's growl became a full holler as it charged back toward the dragon.

Said dragon reflected quickly and assumed that the best course of action, given the circumstances and both opponents' bulk, was to charge back. The ground trembled even more than before as the 2-legged mass of magma and the 4-legged mass of muscle ran toward each other.

The impact was terrible, and both creatures stumbled back a few steps. The demon was quicker to react, and, now that it wasn't hindered by the lightning ball, used his wings to advance toward his initial target.

While he was in mid-air and gliding toward Dumbledore, though, a roar erupted behind it and the dragon went on his burnt paws with difficulty, before using its wings too.

It was a sight to behold. Even if he had recovered enough to cast many protection spells on himself, Albus Dumbledore was quite frightened at it. Two of the most powerful creatures known to man were charging toward him. His battle reflexes kicked in, though, and he cast a powerful Cutting curse to slice through one of the demon arms. The curse was powerful enough to cut through centuries-old trees, stone, and even metal, but the magical internal structure of the demon held, and it healed almost instantly.

With his protection spells, Dumbledore had been able to stand the demon's attacks, one after the other, but the infernal creature now wanted to finish it. All four fists flew forward, each connecting with a different part of the wizard. One was aimed at his pelvis, one at his stomach, one at his chest, and the last to his head. Having only two arms, Dumbledore raised them to protect his vital areas. His pelvis was broken instantly. His stomach had internal damage too. His left arm, protecting his head, was broken in two places. His right arm had been holding his staff, and the demon's attack sent it to the other side of the battlefield. The other result of being hit in the lower region with such strength was that the old man was now making a disgraceful flight in the air, towards...

...towards the rocky part of the lake shore, head first.

Albus Dumbledore was quite out. The last spells had almost emptied his magical reserves, and he wasn't up to use wandless magic right now. He had lost his staff, and couldn't slow his fall. He closed his eyes, waiting for death to take him.

He waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened.

Well... nothing to him anyway. He was still hearing the unmistakable sound of the dragon's roars, and human voices.

Voices?

Startled, he opened his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't. He was still in the air, upside down, and the vision in that position wasn't comfortable. Closing and opening his eyes again, he noticed several things going on.

First, he was going down, slowly, and, at the same time, he was recovering a proper position.

Second, the voices belonged to a group of people which looked undoubtedly muggles to him.

Third, one of these "muggles" was having his hand in the air, toward him, and he noticed that the movements of the hand were reflected by his own position changing.

Fourth, several persons were exiting Hogwarts, heading toward the battlefield. Undoubtedly, the Headmistress woke up or had been awoken, and was coming to his rescue.

His rescue?

Fifth, the battle still raged. But this time, the dragon's roars had an unmistakable tinge of pain in them. Noticing the rumbling sound of the approaching demon, Dumbledore looked up and understood why. The demon was advancing toward him, but the dragon was trying to hold it back by sticking to its back, tearing at everything with fangs and claws.

Now, it wasn't a good idea to stick any creature to a living lump of magma, if the sizzling sounds were any indication of the dragon's pain. Even with a shielding layer of Lightning element, Harry was in pain and quickly tiring. He hoped that the few humans he was noticing in the distance were the promised cavalry.

Joshua Ch'larwen was in a bad mood. He had had to convince spouses, kids, and other parenting figures that it wasn't a joke, and several of his contacts weren't even at home. Still, in the five minutes that had followed Gabriel's departure, he had managed to contact eight Water Magiuses and one of the only two Magma Magiuses in the whole world. As Magiuses knew of the magical world and its

schools, he directly asked them to meet at Hogwarts, and they all used their elemental transportation ability to head there.

Once there, they all understood the urgency of the situation, as a 10-foot tall demon struck a tall sorcerer with its 4 fists, sending him flying in the air. Air was Joshua's element, and he stopped the old man's fall, making sure not to break more bones that he suspected were already.

The others conversed quickly, and decided to quench the mass of magma with water. Concentrating, the eight Water Magiuses sent the water from the lake in the demon's face. Despite the intensity of the jet of water, looking like it came from several fire hoses, the demon only slowed down, before reaching toward Dumbledore again.

The Magma Magius, seeing that, concentrated on his elemental vision, before gasping at the revelation.

"Joshua! The demon! It's bodily connected to the sphere of Magma! It's healing from everything we send to it."

"Is it possible to cut the connection, Pietro?"

"I don't know, I..."

"I suggest you try. I think he is after the old man. I'll provide distraction, but be quick, or we could all taste your element firsthand."

"Okay."

Said Pietro concentrated again, while Joshua moved the still form of Albus Dumbledore in the air. The demon was still hindered by the dragon on his back, but, sensing his enemy's strength lowering, it made a vicious move, rolling on itself to crush the dragon under his burning weight. Harry was almost out, though, and didn't move in time to avoid the hit. When the demon stood up again, Harry thought he was going to die, but the demon's goal was elsewhere, and it took the air to follow the moving wizard around the lake.

“What are you doing?”

The voice was conveying contempt, disgust, and threat. The sneer accompanying it was almost audible also. Severus Snape had reached the group of elementals, and could only witness that the old one was moving Dumbledore around. He drew his wand, intent on making this stop, before hearing gasps around him. Except the two men concentrating, everyone else was looking at something behind him. He turned around.

And found himself in front of a paw.

A leathery paw.

Looking up, he came face-to-face with Harry. Or rather face-to-snout with a dragon.

Even if Harry was tired, he had noticed that the Potion Master was being his usual intolerant self, and he could only stop him. Shape-shifting his vocal box a little, he spoke in a deep voice.

“Let them help.”

Everybody gaped at the voice, especially the wizards, and especially Hagrid. The half-giant had left his hut since the beginning of the fight, but seeing the magnitude of power displayed, he had been hiding in the forest. Now, he could only look at the dragon in wonder. Dragon couldn't speak. Well... they couldn't speak English. It wasn't even possible.

While everyone was quite taken with the dragon issue, Pietro had finished his job. He didn't have to say it, though, because the demon stopped following Dumbledore and uttered an angry rumbling yell.

“NOW!” he said to the Water Magiuses.

And, to the wondering gaze of the wizards, the eight raised their arm and water came from the lake to form a sphere around the demon.

The hissing sounds coming from the airborne water bubble were a clear indication of the weakening of the fiend. Meanwhile, Joshua brought Albus back to the groups, and a discussion erupted about the fact that weakening the demon was good, but insufficient. They had to banish it back to its home, and they could do it with only one thing. Albus' sorcerer staff.

Harry was having trouble staying conscious, now. He had been doing his best to heal his burns, but he was exhausted. Now that the wizards and elementals were working together, he trudged to the forest, under the watchful gaze of Snape and Hagrid. Once sufficiently inside, hidden from the curious gazes, he tried to transform back to his normal shape, but was so worn out that he fell into unconsciousness while doing so.

As nobody else than Albus could take the staff, Joshua went, still holding Albus tightly in his element, to search for the missing staff, hoping that it was still in one piece. Once found, they came back and found the prone form of the demon twitching on the lake shore. Using his staff in his good arm, Dumbledore tried to ignore the sparks dancing in his eyes while he was uttering the demon banishing spell. Once done, he fell into unconsciousness.

"Albus!" yelled the wizards at the same time, trying to get a hold of him.

"I wouldn't do that!" interrupted the old Air master, strengthening the Air shield around the old wizard. "He suffers from heavy exhaustion and several broken bones. I will put him in a proper bed if you want to treat him, but I will do it myself."

"Who are you?" asked Snape suspiciously.

"My name is Joshua Ch'larwen, and I think we have a wounded old man here, so if you would lead the way..."

The two groups headed for the Hospital wing, both happy to have the demon disposed of, but still wary of each other.

Harry slept for a long time. A very long time. The charmed bed continually fed him potions through intravenous needles, so that he wasn't forced to wake up. He slept a full month there, and, when he finally awoke, he first couldn't remember what he was doing there. His limbs were stiff despite the potions, and he was having a breath problem. It wasn't until he went into his mind to organize his memories, while brushing his teeth, that he noticed his refuelled magical centre, and he recalled the events which took place so long ago.

Long ago?

He cursed himself again, because he still didn't have the clocks he wanted. Even if his own watch was working perfectly, he couldn't tell what time it was in the outside world. Or even what day.

He decided to take the safest route, and, after a quick shower and a quick meal, he spoke the words allowing the ring to portkey him to his room at Joan and Michael's place. From there, he inferred that it was late in the afternoon. He called in the house, but the owners were obviously at the fair.

Deciding that he wanted to keep an eye on the proper time now, he left the house and headed to the nearest shopping centre. It was open, and Harry went first to the newspaper kiosk to find about the date in a discreet way. When he found out, though, he gaped. Three days had passed since his run-in with the infernal beast, which means that he spent a month healing in his refuge!

"Hey, boy! You buy it or what?" asked a wary kiosk owner.

"Err... sorry." answered a still flabbergasted Harry, before putting the newspaper back on its stack. At least now, he was fully healed and functional. Because several shops were closing already, he sped toward his next target and bought several wristwatches and clocks. If he was to experiment on them, he reflected that he had to buy a few sets. Some of the mechanical watches and clocks also had the date

on them, and he hoped to be able to adapt them to the hideaway's skewed time frame.

On his way out of the shopping centre, he noticed that a shop wasn't closing yet. It was one little shop where he rarely went, not needing second-hand books. What had attracted his gaze, though, was the lightning bolt on the cover of an old textbook on a muggle university's course in electricity. He skimmed through the other books, and found a booklet about watches and clocks. It was mainly hints to keep them functioning, not an in-depth explanation of their workings, but he guessed that he could use a few of its advices. He paid for the books and left. After he found a dark place, he portkeyed to his refuge again, to drop his purchases and think about his next move. Three days had passed since he left the elementals and wizards together to deal with a demon. He absently wondered what had happened since then, and decided to find out soon.

While he positioned the books in his bookcase, though, he noticed several stacks of papers there, which he remembered taking from his vault. He absently scanned them, but held his breath when a particular drawing held his gaze. It wasn't a complicated one, as it displayed a box of some sorts, but the drawing included a decorated lid and several annotations. What struck him was that the lid looked like the one closing the box resting on top of his bookcase.

In a rush, he put the paper on the desk, grasped the chair and moved the box from its resting place to the desk. Following the annotation, he put his fingers on several key points and spoke the indicated sentence.

“Sesame, Open.”

He was smiling because of the muggle reference, but, to his disappointment, nothing happened. He took his head in his hand in frustration, but, the moment he removed his fingers from the box, he jumped at the contralto voice coming from the box.

“Who is questing for my secrets?” it asked.

“Harry Potter.”

A silence.

“Wrong answer.”

“Harry James Potter.” said Harry, a bit annoyed at the wizards’ constant use of full names.

A silence.

A click.

The lid opened, and Harry was disappointed to find only three items in the box. The first was a wand, and the name written on the handle was Ginevra Shaun, his grandmother. The second was a book, written by the same person, and Harry opened it to the first page, only to find a handwritten message.

Dear descendant,

I know that you are a descendant of mine because I just finished charming the box with the appropriate spells. Know that I failed to protect myself from the Death Eaters. They found my cottage, and I can’t escape because of their wards. I don’t have my ring anymore because James was working on it. Without it, I can’t use the weapons too. Well... I’m stuck. I’m going to use my other wand to make a big fireworks, hopefully taking many of them with me.

This book contains my last findings in Technomancy, as well as a complete guide to my hidden chambers. I hope you can find a good use to both. I will now close the box and activate its charm so that it will go back home.

Time to remove some Death Eaters from the face of the earth!

PS. James, if it’s you, I hope you fare well, my son. If not, I hope you didn’t inherit the Potters’ insufferable ability to get in trouble.

Harry cried on his grandmother's last words, but a word nagged at his mind, until he remembered that a third item rested in the box. It was a leather box, and, when it opened, he found something he never thought he would find in a magical environment, even with his recently acquired knowledge in Technomancy. It was something he didn't have problems to identify, though, thanks to his muggle upbringing.

In the box, glinting in the hideaway's ambient light, were two M-1911 .45 handguns.

In the office of the Minister of Magic, a man was working hard. He had the body of Arthur Weasley, but he didn't work in the same way. Next to him, another man was working in the same direction, adding comments and criticism when he felt the written documents weren't complete.

Arthur Weasley and Broderick Bode were writing law texts.

"What do you think of this one, Joe?" asked Arthur.

"Hey! I already told you not to call me by this name! There could be people listening."

"Sorry, what was it, again? Frederick?"

"Broderick. What did you want to tell me?"

"This text: The werewolf community, comprising dangerous individuals, shall be monitored at all times, as per the law 44-E."

"Nice. We should extend that one to any and all dangerous beasts, though."

"I know. But remember, we can't massively pass laws, we have to do it smoothly. The text on the werewolves will be sent today, and we'll extend it next week."

"Okay. You did pass the one on the Death Munchers, right?"

“Yes. Let me fetch it for a sec... here it is: Any wizard suspected of dark activity will be immediately subjected to a trial with a preliminary hearing with the Ministry’s authorized investigation personnel.” He looked up at the other man, a smirk on his face. “That’s you and me.”

“Good to know. I think we will have a good set of contacts soon.”

“Yeah.”

They worked in silence again, until ‘Joe’ spoke again.

“What are you going to do with your ‘family’?”

“I don’t know yet.” answered the other man. Looking at Broderick, he smiled evilly. “I think I’ll ask the Aurors to put that wretched house under Fidelius. After all, we are at war with this... Volredom?”

“Voldemort.”

“Ah, yes. Dark Lords always had a kick to find stupid names. My... so-called family won’t come back for a few days, and they’ll have quite the surprise then.”

They laughed darkly.

“You could also disown them, you know.”

“Now, that’s an interesting idea. As I formally gave you that right, can you hold the office while I make a stop at Gringotts? I’ll move their belongings to another vault.”

“Sure. Nasty idea, by the way. Speaking of Gringotts, we should include those pesky goblins in the dangerous creatures list, soon.”

“I already thought about it.”

They chuckled again, before composing themselves. The outside world wasn't aware that the Minister of Magic was a different person yet, and there was no need to let anything leak as of yet. In Romania, a few days later...

"Thank you, Charlie."

"Yes, thank you, dear brother-"

"-that was very informative."

The Weasleys were taking leave of their brother, ready to be portkeyed away from Romania. They talked a bit more until the local employee of the Ministry's Department of Transportation told them it was time. Charlie left the room after a last round of embraces, and the timed portkey activated mere seconds afterwards.

They arrived in the Ministry's Transportation Room and, as it was already midday, they decided to take a meal at the Leaky Cauldron. After asking an employee to notify Arthur of their arrival, they left the Ministry and headed for the inn.

They took their meal happily, recounting their memories of the Romanian trip, but they didn't notice the dark looks sent their way until dessert. Just as Ron was going to plunge his spoon in the waiting vanilla cream, a hairy hand beat him to it.

Following the arm until they saw the person behind, Ron gasped. He was angry about somebody wasting his food, but the hate and anger he noticed in the person's eyes was intense, and made him hesitate.

"Hey! Leave us alone!" shrieked Molly, not having noticed the man's fury.

He looked at her with amber eyes. "I could tell you the same, Weasley."

"We didn't do anything to you, now leave, or I call Tom."

“You didn’t do anything? You didn’t do anything? What about this, huh?”

The man removed his hand from Ron’s ruined dessert, and showed it to her. On it, a stylized wolf’s head was embossed, as if it had been marked with a hot poker.

“What do you mean? What is this?” asked Molly, still not understanding.

“You don’t know? Were you outside the country for a time, woman?” seethed the man.

“As a matter of fact, we actually were. Now tell me what you want or I’ll call Tom on you.”

“I doubt Tom would take your side now, you know. And as to what this is, you should ask your wretched husband!”

The man left the inn with these words. Stunned, the Weasleys looked around and found only hostile glares directed their way. Quickly finishing their meal, they agreed to split up, the kids going back home while Molly would ask Arthur about it. Ron was the first to the Leaky Cauldron’s Floo access. He threw some powder in the fire, speaking clearly.

“The Burrow!”

To the Weasleys’ surprised gaze, nothing happened. Ron tried again with no more success. After Fred and George snickering comments on their brother’s inability to use the Floo, their subsequent tries failed too. When they tried to enter the Ministry through the Floo, it failed too. Hearing their attempts, the innkeeper went to them.

“The Ministry closed their Floo access, Mrs Weasley.”

“Why, Tom?”

“You don’t know?”

“Well... no.”

“I don’t know either. You should ask your husband.” he said, contempt dripping in his voice.

Molly didn’t have time to ask for details, because Tom turned away from them. Not understanding the Floo problems anymore than the hostility toward them, they left the Leaky Cauldron to muggle London, heading for the outside Ministry entrance.

After telling their name and their intention in the magicked telephone booth, the elevator brought them to the Ministry lobby, where they got an unpleasant surprise. A dozen Aurors were waiting for them, wands raised.

“Mum, why are they threatening us?” asked a frightened Ginny.

“I don’t know, dear.”

“Molly, Fred, George, Ronald, and Ginny Weasley,” spoke the Auror leading the squad, “you are accused of treason against the wizarding world. Give up your wands and follow us without resistance.”

The words stunned the surprised family more efficiently than a Stupefy. Molly fainted, and the twins lost their cheerful expression. Ron was angry and Ginny looked fearful. Why would they be accused of such a crime?

“This is a misunderstanding!” began Ron. “Check with the Minister, we are from his family!”

“This is a direct order from the Minister himself.” answered the Auror curtly. “Now give your wands.”

“But-” started Ron. He didn’t have time to elaborate, though, as two beams of light struck his chest. He dropped to the ground, unconscious.

“Give up your wands. Now!” ordered the Auror to the shocked Weasleys.

Not understanding, and still stunned by the ordeal, they relinquished their only mean of defence to the squad, before being rudely escorted to separate prison cells in the Ministry dungeon.

Their imprisonment was harsh, and the Aurors keeping them always made fun of them. Sarcasm and mistreatment began to be their daily lot. Molly cried herself to sleep each day, and the children weren't faring better.

Two days after their imprisonment, they heard a commotion outside, but couldn't make heads or tails from it. Ginny could, though, because her cell door opened to let black-robed wizards in. She didn't have time to scream, though, as a Stunner sent her into oblivion.

When she woke up, she was flabbergasted again to find herself in a circle of the same black robes. The deformed laughter escaping from the white masks made her shiver with fright. She had been kidnapped by Death Eaters.

To be continued in next chapter: From the Frying Pan Into the Fire...

It's not getting easier.

Nor is it homelier.

Why did they get her? A test?

Add a review, be my guest.

## Chapter 35 – From the Frying Pan Into the Fire

The man approached the innocuous building, his silver and green robes billowing behind him. Despite being older than the very whole town, he didn't know how he could enter it, although he knew that it was through the innocent-looking booth next to it. He was powerful enough to visualize magic around him, but he also knew that he was losing his power steadily. It has been 83 years since he last fed, and he was missing his ingenious device dearly.

He entered the telephone booth and used his magic awareness to learn how to use it. When the voice from the strange device asked for his name, though, he was a little concerned. Would he give his real name or a fake one? He didn't want to be found out yet, because of his weakened state, and uttered the first thing passing through his mind. His long-dead enemy.

“Godefroy Frederickson.”

The voice made a pause and, for a brief moment, he feared that he had been uncovered. But the voice spoke again.

“State your business.”

He reflected for a second and answered “Recover a lost artefact.”

The voice fell silent, and the cabin began to descend. He quickly found himself in the Ministry lobby, and the clerk who had talked through the telephone asked for his wand. He extracted it, wary of anything unusual about it, but the clerk merely uttered a spell and a visitor badge appeared, stating his assumed name and business.

“Wear this badge at all times. It will disappear once you leave the premises. The Department of Artefacts is on the fourth level. Good day.”

“Good day.” answered the man automatically. He wasn't used to the bureaucracy, as his time was much simpler, and had to ask his way several times. When he found the elevator, his odd demeanour

earned him curious glances from the people there. He sighed. Times had changed very much during his long imprisonment.

Contrarily to his reputation, he wasn't the aggressive type, though, and didn't threaten his way here or there. If he had been, he could have found what he sought. As it was, he was sent from service to service and ended the day exhausted, and without having found anything.

At the same time, in a secluded set of rooms...

The weapons were beautiful. They seemed identical, both coated in platinum and adorned with several jewels. The only difference was the biggest gemstone set in the rear. One was a crimson ruby, and the other was a dark blue sapphire. Not knowing their exact use, as his grandmother's last words implied Technomancy, he read the booklet which accompanied them, and found many interesting things.

...the hidden chambers are situated in my cottage's basement. To access it from the outside, or to exit it in the same way, I have to use the ring, or adjust its time flow to be the same than the outside one. I'm only able to do this from the inside, though, but I should find a way to do it from the house. The time frame, like several other properties of the chambers, is controlled by the panel hidden behind the cedar pane at the bed's head. The buttons' gem defines their goal: diamond is for adjusting the time flow; ruby is for the temperature; sapphire is for the light. Rooms can be added or removed by pressing the corresponding emerald buttons.

Looking up, he fumbled a little, and found said panel. It had several other buttons to it, but he immediately used the diamond one to revert the time flow to be the same than the outside world. As written in the book, a door immediately appeared, supposedly leading to his grandmother's cottage.

He was already halfway through the book, though, and decided to continue reading before exploring the countryside.

Several pages later...

...years back, when I designed the weapons, I had several choices. I preferred the 1911 model because it was already highly customisable in the muggle world. They are covered in a magical substance which can look like anything I want, although I prefer platinum for the moment. They are one of a kind, now, because the other Technomancers don't like messing with weapons. I had an inkling about them during the previous war, though. We would have lost fewer people if they had been made then. They are charmed to work with my Jumping ring, and if the ring wearer removes it, they will be sent back to the chambers soon afterwards. Another of the weapons' properties is their notice-me-not charm. They won't be noticed until hand held, and as such, can be stowed in regular pockets without being detected.

How they work: they are initially empty, which is denoted by the dark aspect of the gem. I can imbue them with a spell, by casting it while touching the gem with a wand. Once activated, they will keep the spell for a year, and the gem will be alit. To use them, I do like regular muggle guns: I take it in my hand, and press the trigger with my index finger. The spell will be released then, using my own magical energy to fuel it. I chose different gems so that I'll recognise them should I load them with different spells. The gems can be rotated to switch between single-shot (pressing the trigger will release the spell once) and semi-automatic (pressing once releases three bursts one closely after the other). The semi-automatic setting is more taxing for the magic, though. I didn't think including a full-automatic option was interesting, because almost nobody has the power needed to sustain a constant drain of energy. They are-

Harry suddenly closed his eyes and held his head in pain. He recognised the feeling and, not wanting to fall into unconsciousness because of the incoming vision from Voldemort, he strengthened his membrane-type mind shield. He was going to find out, though, that it didn't block the vision, only blocking the pain and preventing him from falling unconscious. It also gave him a much better insight of Voldemort's thoughts.

Meanwhile, in a dark cottage...

Voldemort was angry, but happy at the same time.

He was angry because his Ministry spies reported that his yet-unnamed ally had gone to the Ministry several times without telling him. He was also angry because his Order of the Phoenix spy told him that a boy he thought dead was alive.

However, he was quite happy, because the current Minister of Magic had made several discreet attempts to make an alliance with him. He knew that Arthur Weasley was normally on the light side, but his spies had reported that his new laws weren't Light in nature and effect. Quite the contrary. In a subtle way, a note from said Minister made him understand that he wasn't Arthur Weasley himself but another spirit. As if he was possessed but without the usual drawbacks. In clear, he couldn't be exorcised.

Voldemort was also happy because of his two new prisoners. Draco Malfoy was quite an enigma, obviously being out of his right mind. Ginny Weasley, though, captured thanks to the new Minister's actions, was very frightful of her new state. Through several spy reports, going as far as a year back, he knew that she was Harry Potter's girlfriend, and he intended to use her to get Harry, so that the boy would be able to either join him, or be killed.

"My faithful followers!"

The black-robed wizards and witches cowered, before noticing the jubilant tone.

"We have several trump cards at our disposal as of yet."

A confused silence ensued while Voldemort enjoyed his speech.

"It was confirmed to me that Harry Potter" the name was uttered with hatred and contempt, "was alive."

At these words, his followers looked at each other with even more confusion. Wasn't Harry Potter dead the year before?

“I got reports that the infamous boy lived as a muggle for a year, before joining the magical world again. You think it’s normal?”

His audience didn’t want to answer, because the dark lord was usually torturing those who spoke out of turn. However, Voldemort was in sermon mode, and he expected a cheer.

“You think it’s normal?” he repeated, louder.

Several Death Eaters got the hint, and timidly answered “No.”

“I don’t hear you! Do you think it’s normal that the boy be allowed to live?”

A chorus of “No!” answered him.

“Ah, I knew you’d agree.” he said, smiling. A dangerous, evil smile.

“We are going to lure him here, using that wretched muggle-lover.” he said, kicking the prone body in front of him so that the bloodied face of Ginny Weasley was visible.

“I want the few of you in contact with that old fool Dumbledore to make him aware that she’s in my power. He surely knows where the boy is, and it will bring him here. Make sure to double the patrols, and, when the boy arrives, subjugate him and bring him to me! When he’ll find in what state the girl is, he’ll submit. Like this: Crucio!”

The red beam struck Ginny’s body and she writhed on the floor, under the cackle of Voldemort, quickly followed by his followers’ laughter.

Harry cut the connection with a start, before hurrying in his bathroom to empty his stomach in disgust. He then straightened up, feeling an unbearable coldness inside him. If Voldemort wanted to play this game, he will find a worthy adversary.

After using his grandmother's wand to cast the explosion curse on one gun and a cutting curse on the other, he stored them in his pockets and portkeyed to Hogwarts.

Several days before, in Dumbledore's office...

Albus Dumbledore was glad. He was glad to be alive. When the demon had appeared and called his name, he had thought that he could take it like he had done several times a century ago. However, he wasn't as resilient as before, and the demon had been particularly tough. After battling with it alone for half an hour, he had noticed that the demon had never seemed hurt by his attacks, while he was losing strength and magical power steadily. At that time, he had regretted stunning Minerva, because she could have helped him a little.

He was glad, but displayed a thoughtful frown. His main concern was the reason why the dragon had begun protecting him. Never in his whole life had he met dragons willing to meddle in human affairs unless it was his Dragon Mate who was threatened. The interfering dragon had also displayed several abilities unheard of. Not only was it very resilient to the demon's lava body, but it had also regrown its claws several times. It also never breathed fire, rather attacking with strange balls of lightning, something he didn't know was possible.

Now, though, he was concerned about the people in his office. These wizards and witches, some of them he knew from Hogwarts, had displayed strange abilities too. Their explanations weren't making sense, and he found that he couldn't enter their mind at all. As if his own mind was surrounded with an impenetrable shield. After Madam Pomfrey's treatment, after which he requested to be left conscious, he had a private meeting with the man who seemed to be the leader, the others leaving the premises toward Hogsmeade.

"So, Professor Dumbledore," started Joshua, "are you still teaching Transfiguration?"

"Yes I am, Joshua. Actually, I stepped down from the Headmaster position this year, after last summer's Ministry scuffle. Minerva is Headmistress now."

“I noticed that she was still around. Nothing happened between the two of you yet?” Joshua asked with an amused glint in his eyes. “In my time, the rumour mill was very... prolix.”

“Now, now, Joshua. Don’t invent things.”

Joshua became serious again. “In fact, I requested the private meeting because I have a question. Do you know where Gabriel is?”

“Who?”

“Gabriel Swift. He is another Mag... a young wizard, 15 or 16 years old. Brown hair, blue eyes, tanned skin. He came to my office and suddenly fell in a trance. When he woke up, he yelled for us to come to your rescue before leaving, supposedly to help you. We didn’t see him around, though.”

Albus reflected about that for several seconds before replying. “I didn’t notice anyone there until your arrival, and I don’t know about a boy with this name. Is it his real name?”

Joshua looked sheepishly at his old Professor. “I... kind of... scanned his mind. Briefly, mind you. And he really thinks that it’s his name. So, I guess that must be-”

“You know,” interrupted Albus, who had been thoughtful during Joshua’s diatribe, “I didn’t see a person, but that interfering dragon came into the fight half an hour before your appearance.”

“Half an hour? But... that’s...” Joshua looked at Albus with wide eyes. “That’s the time I used to gather the others Magi... magical people.”

Albus looked at the man with a surprised glance. “Do you think... do you think that the boy was in fact a Metamorphic Dragon? The most powerful dragons of legend, able to mingle between humans?”

“Well... I don’t know. I’ll try to get more information.” answered Joshua, thinking about one person able to give him that information.

Luna Lovegood. Besides, he still had four people standing still in his scrambled office in Coventry Street, waiting for him to release them.

The two men exchanged several ideas, before Joshua excused himself and left the castle. The man gone, Albus Dumbledore was alone to think, and his first thought was to ask himself why Joshua, the clean and precise speaker, had stumbled several times on simple words. He sighed, and downed the vials Poppy had left on the nightstand for him to sleep his wounds away.

The next days went like a blur of unbelievable information for the old professor, as numerous reports came from his spies in the Ministry. At the same time, Severus finally found Jugson again and extracted Voldemort's past actions and current plan. And it looked like hell. Arthur Weasley wasn't reachable for an explanation on his new laws, and the Ministry building was closed from outside interference. Albus himself was still healing and couldn't go there himself.

Four days after his run-in with the demon, he was having a full Order meeting, minus the Weasleys, none of them being reachable. Also missing were Hagrid, Sirius, and Remus, who currently travelled through Ural to get the local giants' help. Today's meeting topic was their Minister's current actions and laws, which were going darker and darker. In the middle of a sentence, though, his fireplace came to life, something strange because it was only accessible from chosen locations, one of which being the Ministry.

Nobody appeared, though, but after a short pause, an arm slipped in the green flame and dropped a scroll in the room. In the stunned silence which followed, the arm retracted and the green fire disappeared.

"Don't touch it!" roared Snape as several members had jumped on their feet. He approached the scroll and uttered a few identification and trap detection spells, before turning towards Dumbledore.

"It's a portkey, Albus. But there is a message written in it. Shall I?"

"Please, do, Severus."

The Potion Master then levitated the message on Albus' desk and magically unrolled it. In a voice which quickly grew concerned, he read it aloud for the others' benefit.

Dear Muggle-loving old fool,

I guess you are wondering why I'd contact you at all. Know that it had come to my understanding that your favourite boy, the one-who-lived, is alive. I really want to have a little chat with him, and therefore provided you with this portkey. It's charmed to accept only one person, so don't think you'd be able to bring an army. I also made it so that only a teenage boy can use it. If you try to use it yourself, you'd find a very unpleasant end in the middle of a lava pool. The portkey activation word is "pureblood."

Why would he come to me? Simple. I detain Ginny Weasley. If you know what is good for you, you'll give him the letter. Otherwise, he'll receive a body part for each missing day.

Lord Voldemort

A shocked silence ensued, and then everybody started speaking at the same time. As nobody could hear anything in the commotion, speaking quickly came to shouting. After unsuccessfully trying to re-establish the calm, Albus shook his head, his still deep wounds preventing him from shouting himself.

Something else happened, though, which brought back silence in the cramped office. Several nearby explosions rocked the office walls, and everybody jumped on their feet. Well, everybody except Dumbledore, who sat up painfully. They all turned toward the door, intent on finding the cause of these explosions, when said door was forcefully opened and somebody entered the office.

Somebody particularly angry.

Somebody who disregarded the twenty wands aimed on him.

Somebody nobody recognized, except Dumbledore and McGonagall, although barely.

Somebody whose eyes sought Dumbledore, and upon finding him, yelled.

“WHERE IS SHE?”

Harry Potter.

Severus Snape let his instincts kick in and approached, sneering, with the intent to tell him off. He was cut short, though, as something shiny and dangerous-looking appeared under his nose, held in Harry's hand. It wasn't a wand, but every wizard with a little muggle culture gasped.

“I didn't like you before,” Harry began, his eyes alit with a dangerous power, “and I won't hesitate to paint the wall with your brain if you restrain me, now, TELL ME WHERE SHE IS!” he finished, looking at Dumbledore again.

“Now, Harry, you can't hope-” began Dumbledore.

“STOP! I didn't come here to listen to fairy tales! Ginny is being tortured at this very moment, and I don't intend to let her suffer!”

“But you can't go!”

“Why?” Harry's tone was cutting in itself, and Dumbledore winced, knowing that the teenager wouldn't hear reason. He had to try, though. The prophecy...

“Harry, there's a prophecy-”

“I know! The so-called Warrior of Light-”

“Not this one! There's another, and it implies that you can't run headfirst into Voldemort's trap.”

A silence. Harry frowned. Albus thought that he was regaining the upper hand. Slowly.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t go to save Ginny from that madman? Why I should let her suffer? Let her die?”

“It’s for the greater good, Harry. Only you can destroy Voldemort, but you are not ready to face him yet. You will be, later, if you train appropriately. And until then, I forbid-”

“Not ready? NOT READY? Whose fault is it? Who dropped me in a muggle house for ten years? And how dare you forbid me anything?” Harry’s eyes were sparkling, now, but it wasn’t in amusement. He approached the old man behind the desk, releasing a sweating Snape in the process. Spotting the old man’s crutches, he nodded toward them, before speaking slowly.

“Don’t make me regret saving your life, old man.”

“What do you mean?” asked a frightened Minerva, voicing everybody’s question.

Albus tried to regain hold of the conversation. “Look. I don’t remember you ever saving my life, Harry, and I really can’t tell you anything about your first question either. You can’t barge in, during an Ord... a private meeting, and... by the way, how did you enter?”

Harry had been looking contemptuous, then furious, and finally smug during Albus’ tirade, but the underlying anger was still burning underneath the calmer facade.

“Read my mind if you think that my pitiful self couldn’t have saved an old, experienced, and powerful wizard.” Speaking louder, so that the other people in the room understood, he said “And I only granted Dumbledore the permission.”

Minerva frowned at the boy’s cheek and utter lack of respect. At the same time, Snape smirked. Even if Harry hadn’t said anything about ‘granting his permission’, he would have prodded the youngling’s

mind anyway. As Dumbledore was going to do it at the same time, he would be undetectable.

“Legilimens.” spoke Dumbledore, his wand aimed at Harry’s head.

“Legilimens.” silently mouthed Snape at the same time, doing the same action.

Both wizards found their conscious mind floating in front of a large, spherical, and gelatinous blob of unknown matter, although they didn’t notice each other yet. Both frowned.

Harry’s mind cell-like membrane recognized Albus, and it shimmered, before giving way to a small bubble of Harry’s memories. An edited memory of the fight with the demon. No reference was made about Harry’s true powers, only the fact that he was the dragon. After witnessing the scene, realizing that Harry had really put himself in grave danger for him, Albus almost collapsed under the flow of emotions which passed through him. Shame. Guilt. Sorrow.

Still in Harry’s mind, a sound interrupted his trance. Someone was screaming in pain, and it seemed to come from Harry’s mind. He looked up, startled.

“What is it? Harry? Are you alright?”

A feeling washed through him, and he understood that Harry was fine. Very fine, even. The blob in front of him rotated until he noticed something sticking to it. Something humanoid, and screaming in pain. He narrowed his eyes, trying to discern what it was.

When he found out, though, he yelped in surprise. And dread. “Harry! You have to release him!”

Once again, feelings washed over him, and he understood that, by disobeying Harry’s request, Snape brought this upon himself. He was still curious about how it was done, though, and extended his consciousness’ hand toward Snape and the blob. He didn’t go far,

before feeling a slap on it and being forcefully kicked out of the teen's mind.

When Dumbledore opened his eyes again, he found a smug Harry looking at him. Looking behind the teenager, he noticed the crumpled body of his Potion Master.

"I told them not to. He did."

"What is it, Harry? What did I see? I never saw anything looking like that before."

Harry sneered. "It' because, despite being known as muggle-lover by everyone, you are not interested by what they do. And learn, too, by the way."

Harry frowned for a second, and the Potion Master stood up with a sudden yelp.

"I freed him. Now, help me free Ginny. Where is she?"

Albus sighed. Judging by everything he had seen, the boy had a bigger chance than him to free her. Especially now that he was in crutches. Would they come back unscathed, though? That was the question.

"Okay, Harry. Before you go, I will still ask if you have a plan or a precise intention while being there. We can help you, perhaps. I could cast a magical shield on you before you leave."

Harry seemed to think about it. In fact, he really thought about it. He hadn't made any plan. He extracted his two guns from his pockets, surprising everyone. One after the other, he positioned them on the semi-automatic setting, while speaking to the shocked old man. Of course, in his long life, Dumbledore had noticed the muggle arts of destruction, and these weapons should never have been in a teenager's hands.

"-tack spells do you know?"

Harry had been talking to him. He shook his head and asked for him to repeat.

“What powerful attack spells do you know?” obliged Harry, rolling his eyes.

Albus reflected. “It depends on your intent. Some spells maim, others stun...”

“I know, I know. I want to incapacitate them, but I don’t want them to wake with an all-too-easy enervate. I also want spells that can go through most shields.”

“There is the Lance of Power curse. It passes through most shields. Only very powerful wizards can stop it. It goes through several yards of soft matter too, allowing the caster to take several ranks out at the same time. It is very taxing, though.”

Harry was thinking hard. When Dumbledore finished his speech, Harry had rotated the ruby back to the single-shot position, not wanting to be drained of his energy too quickly. Holding the weapon by the cannon, he spoke again.

“Very well. Cast it on the ruby.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Cast that spell on the ruby. You don’t have to know anything else.”

“Harry...” started professor Flitwick, the tiny Charm teacher, “what exactly is that?”

“Not now, professor. I promise you’ll have information, but I need to be quick now.” Noticing that Dumbledore had finished casting the spell, he switched guns, and, looking at Dumbledore with an amused glance, said “Another spell, please.”

Surprisingly, as Dumbledore was thinking about another spell, a timid voice came from the assembled people.

“You could turn them to stone.”

The voice came from professor Sprout. When she noticed that everybody was looking at her, she shrugged. “What? At least, you wouldn’t kill them, but they would need a specific potion to heal, and it had to be made on purpose. After what happened last year, I read a bit, and found a spell that duplicated the Basilisk eye effect, actually turning people into stone. It was the Transmogrifus hex, I think.”

“You’re right, Pomona.” said Minerva. “I forgot about it, but I knew it from my old days. It’s strange how I never used it in battle, only using Transfiguration on objects...” she trailed off, staring into space.

Harry was feeling restless, now. “Can you cast it?”

“What?”

He sighed, before answering in a sing-song voice. “Professor McGonagall, can you cast the spell on this sapphire, please?”

She looked at Albus, who nodded back. Sighing, she concentrated, and uttered the spell. Like the ruby under Dumbledore’s ministrations, the blue gem was now alit with power.

Harry took hold of the two guns, and looked at Dumbledore. “Thank you. Now, where is she? I lost enough time already.”

“Voldemort sent us a portkey, charmed to take only you. Otherwise, we’d have gone along. The activation word is... pureblood.”

“Understandable. Where is it?”

“Let me cast a shield first. As I am the one casting it, it will be fuelled by my energy. Despite having recovered from my... our... previous fight, be aware that it could go down if you are going to be heavily assaulted. It also doesn’t block the Unforgivables.”

“Thank you. Let’s do this.”

“Shall we add a Tracking charm on him, too?” asked Flitwick.

“You know it’s useless, Filius.” answered Dumbledore. “Voldemort’s hiding place has always confused our Trackers.”

“Now that this is out, can I go? Please?” asked Harry sarcastically, reminding Dumbledore about the shield.

The spell cast, Harry was surrounded in a magical field extending one inch around him. He smiled, and took the parchment. He opened his mouth, reflected about it for a second, and closed it. Looking shameful, he spoke to the Headmistress.

“Sorry for the gargoyle. It wouldn’t let me through. Pureblood.”

The boy gone, pandemonium erupted again. Most of the Order members respected Dumbledore and his decisions, but it was usual for them to comment on them in length. Now, with Harry’s many outbursts, few of them understanding them, they had things to chat about. Albus turned his seat around, though, to escape the commotion. He then concentrated on his energy level, monitoring Harry’s progress through its decrease.

In the room behind him, several people were talking together.

Moody approached Snape and, after tapping on his shoulder, addressed him with his usual curtness. “What happened in the boy’s mind?”

Severus smirked. “You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try me.”

A sigh. “I found a large sphere, and when I got close to it, it recognized me. What happened then I don’t know, but I felt trapped. Like... like a fly in a honey pot.”

Moody smirked. "Did you eat your content?"

"Did I say honey? It sure didn't have the taste. I was stuck like that, but feeling as if I was drenched in acid."

An intake of breath.

"Yes, I agree. It's rather unpleasant."

"You went for it, though."

"I know! That's why I want to kick myself now. The darn boy got me ag-"

He didn't finish his sentence, because a shriek came from the opened door.

While Moody and Severus were discussing, and while Dumbledore was getting steadily weaker and weaker, Minerva and Pomona had had a short conversation.

"What did he mean with the gargoyle?" had asked the Herbology teacher.

"I don't know, I'll check." had answered Minerva, before leaving the room.

When she had noticed the state of the famous gargoyle, she had shrieked in surprise, the sound bringing several other members out of her office.

"What... Was that Harry?" asked the tiny professor Flitwick.

"If he conveniently arrived after the explosions we felt, and if he apologized for it, there are chances that he's the culprit." sneered Snape.

“If he’s that powerful, he will succeed, then?” asked Sprout, hoping against hope that Harry and Ginny were going to be fine.

“I doubt it.” answered Snape. “The Dark Lord is very powerful now, and has many followers.”

Throwing an angry glance at the Potion Master, Minerva answered her plump colleague. “We can only hope, Pomona. We can only hope.”

They suddenly heard a tumult up the few steps leading to the office. Going there, they found Poppy Pomfrey giving potions to a panting and ashen-faced Albus Dumbledore. Harry had left only fifteen minutes earlier and, judging by Albus’ state, he clearly didn’t have his shield anymore.

A short time later...

Harry slumped against the damp cell wall, panting, and crying. He wanted to slam his head in the wall, but wasn’t having any strength left. These torture sessions were exhausting, and he didn’t even have the possibility to use his shape-changing powers here, as the wards seemed to prevent all kinds of shape changing. His elemental abilities depended on his energy, and he had emptied it in one go before being taken. While it had been satisfactory at the time, he didn’t have time to recharge himself since then, and between the torture sessions, he couldn’t even start. In one of his rare moments of sanity, he reflected that would have helped to adjust his nerves with Lightning to lessen the impact of the Cruciatus. He kicked the bedpost in despair. He didn’t even have his ring anymore! Holding himself in the dark and cold cell, he tried to ignore his own stench to get a few minutes of uninterrupted sleep, a rarity.

As always, he dreamed of his capture. It was more a nightmare than a dream, though.

Harry had arrived right in the middle of Voldemort’s Throne room, and immediately spotted several wands trained on him, as well as the prone form of Ginny between him and Voldemort.

“Ah, my boy. You arrived, at last. We will have a little chat together if you will. But let me take care of a now useless detail. Avada Kedavra!”

And Harry, stunned by Voldemort’s action, saw the green light connect to Ginny’s body.

Ginny, whose bloodied form lied at his feet.

Ginny, whose eyes, barely opened, had spotted him and held a modicum of hope.

Ginny, who was now dead. Lifeless.

He felt something starting to tear inside him, and knew what was going to happen. An elemental surge like never before. He restrained himself for a second, though, because he didn’t want Ginny’s body to be damaged. He wanted her in his refuge. Even dead, he wanted her body safe from prying eyes and hands. It would be her tomb. Only afterwards would he exact his revenge. His mind wasn’t thinking straight, and he thought that, with her gone, his life was forfeit anyway.

He kneeled at her side, under the laughter of the surrounding Death Eaters mocking his Gryffindor chivalry. A full meeting. Good. Under the cover of his cloak, he removed his ring. His faithful ring. And he slipped it to her finger. Embracing her for the last time, but not touching the ring itself, he spoke through his tears.

“I’m sorry, Ginny. I should have helped you. They’ll pay, though. May you rest in peace. Safehaven.”

When Voldemort and the Death Eaters noticed that Harry Potter was now embracing an empty spot, they began to grow restless. The boy couldn’t teleport bodies, now could he?

Of course he could. And he could do much more as they were going to find out. The small moan that was coming from the slumped teen

rose in intensity and volume as he was progressively standing. At the same time, the space around him started to fill with crackling energy. Nobody knew what that was, and several curses flew towards the kneeling boy, only to be absorbed by Dumbledore's shield. When they thought that the boy couldn't scream louder, his voice still raised a notch or two, before breaking suddenly.

And hell broke loose at the same time. Instantaneously.

The lightning summoned around Harry had contained every little pleasure or pain from his life. It was his whole reserve of energy, and the damages were on par with the boy's loss.

Voldemort flew backwards because of the blast, and passed through the large window, only to fall from third floor onto the rocky soil around his cottage. He had turned his head just before the blast, and was burnt "only" on the whole side of his head, as well as his hands. His chest, arms, and legs had been damaged too, to a lesser extent. Passing through the window brought about numerous cuts on his arms and back. Upon crashing on the ground, he also broke his right leg in three places, as well as his right arm, his clavicle, and a few ribs. His other personal loss was his wand. It had been out, and the energy blast had scorched its outside quite well, and falling on it caused it to finally snap, triggering another explosion, which resulted in his wand hand being utterly destroyed. In all purposes, he didn't have a hand there anymore. He lost his consciousness as well.

A large part of the Death Eaters who attended the meeting didn't have that luck. Or rather, they didn't have the same lack of luck. The first rank of Death Eaters around him suffered the brunt of the surge and they were vaporized on the spot. Most of the Death Eaters of the second rank lost enough flesh that they couldn't be considered living anymore. The third and fourth ranks suffered burns of varying degree. Some died of it immediately, while others suffered for a long time before either dying or receiving the appropriate potions. A quarter of the remaining Death Eaters retched at the display, while another quarter tried to escape and flee the obviously powerful wizard. It still left half of them free to curse Harry back. Curses being blocked by the shield, again.

Harry, having depleted his elemental energy, extracted his guns from his pockets, under the wary gaze of the black-robed wizards and witches. Despite being hit by several Explosion and Cutting curses at the same time, Harry held his ruby gun to his right, and his sapphire to his left, before pressing the triggers as fast as he could. After fifteen seconds and several more Death Eaters incapacitated, the guns, which were still linked to the ring, disappeared from his hands. Harry then fell on his knees, exhausted. The Death Eaters suspected that it was finished, and, after an intense barrage of curses, Dumbledore's shield finally collapsed and Harry was stunned and taken prisoner. Some older Death Eaters made good use of his prone state to use the Cruciatus on him. Intensely. Repeatedly. Two or more at a time. Only after several minutes did they decide to leave him, naked, in the coldest and dampest cell they had. And they then sought their master.

He hadn't heard the cries of pain of the wounded, then. He hadn't seen the mangled bodies of the dead. He hadn't smelt the burnt flesh either. He hadn't even felt the few rounds of Cruciatus which followed.

But in his nightmares, it all came back to haunt him.

He woke up with a start. Another session had started. Another couple of vengeful Death Eater coming to train their proficiency in casting the Cruciatus curse. Again.

Voldemort had forbidden them to do it too much, and Harry suspected that healing spells and potions were being used on him while he slept, to keep him alive. He hadn't seen Voldemort since Ginny... since then, and he suspected that the Dark Lord was hiding to lick his own wounds, waiting to be fully cured to be seen again. To be able to kill again. To kill him.

He wasn't completely wrong.  
Meanwhile, in another cell in another building...

In another kind of cell, another teenage boy looked at the wall angrily. It was night time, but he was restless. He didn't know what was happening with his family. He didn't know what happened to Ginny or

why his mother stopped screaming after three days. He didn't know how Ron was faring due to the lack of food, but he knew something. Fred was in pain.

Twins were renowned to do that, you know. They are sometimes gifted with a limited telepathy link. And George knew that his favourite brother had been kicked viciously by the warden on the last shift, and that he was hurting, lying on the cell stone floor.

George started to pace in his cell restlessly, but quickly noticed that he stopped several at a precise point in his pacing. Always the same point. The wall right to the door. He knew his twin was there. He felt it. And he knew it was reciprocated. Angry at the events, he did something he never did before, perhaps because it was completely stupid given the state of his naked foot and the stony walls of his cell.

He kicked the wall. Hard.

And something strange happened.

Instead of breaking on the hard stone, his foot passed through it, followed by his leg and the other parts of his body in the correct order. A stunned George Weasley found himself in his twin brother's cell, to said brother's equally astonished face.

"Hey George. What are you doing in my royal suite?" asked Fred weakly.

"I don't know. I just kicked the wall, and I passed through." answered George, looking at his foot as if it was at fault.

"How?"

"I don't know either."

Fred's face lit up. "Hey, you can escape! And perhaps take us out too!"

George looked around, frowning.

“What?” asked his twin.

George frown intensified, and he spoke, looking at the door intently. “I’ll try.”

He brought his leg back, taking aim, and kicked the door. Hard.

In front of Fred’s stunned gaze, George disappeared through the door.

There was only word expressing Fred’s reaction. “Wicked!”

George found himself in the dank corridor, lucky that nobody was there at that moment. He slowly walked towards the exit, silent on his naked feet, and wary of every little sound. He had to find a way to let his family out, and quickly. He quickly found himself at the end of the prison corridor, with a door in front of him and another one on his right.

His memory told him that the door in front of him led outside, and the sign on the other door told him that he had to delay escaping. ‘Prisoners depot.’

After all, the cell doors weren’t locked by keys but by magic. And to open them, he needed to retrieve his previously confiscated wand. He kicked the door again, hoping that the weird pass-wall thingy was still working.

It was.

He found himself in a small round room where several boxes containing miscellaneous items, each with a hand-written label. He quickly found his family’s wands and missing clothing. He quickly put his boots on, his naked feet being quite cold now. After gathering everything, he went to the door, and kicked it.

...only succeeding in harming himself, as the door held true. And the resulting sound echoed in the whole corridor.

He looked at his foot, and had an idea. The only difference between now and before was his boots. Hearing footsteps coming from afar, he removing his boots quickly and kicked the door again. Once in the corridor, he sighed and ran to his own cell, kicking his way through the door again. Panting at the exertion, he quickly deposited his meagre loot under the straw bed and lied on it.

He had just closed his eyes and calmed his ragged breathing, faking sleep like the prankster he was, when the door's window opened and closed a second afterwards. He heard the Aurors outside grumbling at the false alarm while opening and closing the eyepieces from the other cells.

Five minutes after the men left, he took the loot from under him and kicked his way toward his brother again. There would be some action tonight.

Around the same time, in a plane approaching England...

“What is your book about?”

Hermione looked around them, and whispered in Megan's ear. “Remember when Harry used that spell on you? I asked myself questions about that, and bought a book on Advanced Alchemy. Pretty interesting views.”

Megan smirked. “Couldn't prevent yourself to start studying even before arriving home, huh?”

“Of course not!” huffed Hermione, although the two weeks of vacation they had spent together made Megan recognise the amused twinkle in her older friend's eyes.

The plane was on its way to Heathrow, and the two girls would be home in a few hours...

...or so they thought.

To be continued in next chapter: Blood, Magic, and Blood Magic...

There is death in this chapter.  
If you're sad, read another  
Previously explaining things  
And listing the proceedings.

## Chapter 36 – Blood, Magic, and Blood Magic

Lord Voldemort was annoyed, quite angry, and royally pissed off. And that state had lasted for several days already. Since he had been disgracefully thrown through the window, in fact. It had taken two days for his followers to find him a replacement wand, and he was also furious about its inappropriateness. And all this was because of a mad plan to subjugate Harry Potter and the boy's response to it. He had inflicted a huge setback to Voldemort's forces, killing around fifteen Death Eaters and wounding twice as many, several of whose were still in a critical state. Of the casualties, several Death Eaters, like Mulciber and Travers, came from Voldemort's inner circle, and that had angered the Dark Lord even more. His remaining followers had been authorized to vent their frustration on the boy, by Voldemort, with the intent of breaking his will enough to either push him to their side, or kill him.

Harry Potter wasn't dying, although he wanted to. Now that he had exacted his revenge, his thoughts always involved Ginny and his sorrow. He was slowly becoming mad. His precious membrane-like mental shield had held for two days, but the constant onslaught of pain caused it to crackle, and he began to feel the true extent of the Cruciatus, on top of totally losing the notion of passing time. He also started to lose his control on his other powers.

He was seeing double most of the time, his magical eye and his elemental vision working at the same time. Because of this, he noticed his raw nerve endings, and understood the Cruciatus curse better than anyone. He couldn't do anything about it, though, being constantly subjected to it.

The unhealthiest effect of the pain was the result of the numerous Cruciatus curses on his shape-shifting abilities, associated with the wounds caused by more conventional, and bloody, methods of torturing. When Harry was in the throes of the pain curse, these wounds opened widely, tearing his flesh until muscles were hanging and bones showing. The sight generally disturbed the youngest Death Eaters, but some of the most hardened ones went on, until he was bleeding heavily on the unforgiving floor.

Because of the intense strain on his body, his skin and hair slowly lost their pigmentation, becoming a dirty ashen colour for the former, and a dull white for the latter. And of course, his throat was raw to the blood because of his constant screaming.

The colour, noticed by Voldemort in one of his visits to the boy, reminded him of another prisoner, and he imagined that it would be interesting to organize a get-together of the two school enemies. Therefore, an hour afterwards, an unconscious Draco Malfoy was dragged in Harry's cell before being chained to the opposite wall. Draco was already mad, though, and he didn't react to Harry's presence at all. Harry himself was unconscious at that moment, so the little show that Voldemort wanted had to wait for a Death Eater to enervate him. The two boys, of whose one had a man's body, looked at each other but didn't utter a word at all, each being lost in his own world of pain, despair, and madness.

It wasn't until every black-robed wizard left, leaving the two alone, that Draco's eyes lit with something. Struggling against the chains, he advanced toward the prone teenager, until he was blocked in the middle of the room.

"Potter! Come here!" he whispered urgently.

When it was clear that the other boy wasn't going to react at all, he closed his eyes and slumped in defeat. Half a second afterwards, though, he straightened up, and looked at Harry again. His normally grey eyes had faded to a light blue shade, and he spoke with a voice deeper than his usual one.

"Harry Potter! Crawl if you must but do come here!"

The called teenager started and blinked. His vision was still going haywire, and he didn't recognise the person in front of him.

"Hurry! We don't have much time! They'll be back in five minutes!"

Struggling to stay conscious, Harry followed the voice, creeping toward Malfoy. He had to stop a few times to gather whatever

remained of his strength, but finally arrived at the limit of his chains, four feet from Draco.

“Harry, hear me out. It’s important and you must stay conscious. This man” he said, indicating himself, “has agreed to lend his concourse to help you survive this ordeal with your sanity intact. You’d live otherwise, but that’d be all. We are far away, but they didn’t chain his legs. I’ll lie on the floor, and you are going to bite his ankle. Do you understand?”

Harry was looking at Draco owlshly, not understanding who he was and what he was doing.

Sighing, Draco repeated, while sitting then lying on the stony floor. “Bite this ankle, Harry. You need it. Bite it... and drink from it. Bite this ankle, Harry...”

Hypnotised by the voice, Harry inched near the proffered naked ankle and bit it. Because of his lack of strength, it didn’t cut the skin. Realizing it, the entity possessing Draco’s body brought his legs back to the rusty chains holding his arms together. Hitting one with the other, he succeeded in drawing a bit of blood. That wasn’t much, but better than nothing. Repeating his exhortations, he extended the legs again.

Harry bit again, but this time, there was blood already. He licked it tentatively, and an old hunger awakened immediately in him. His eyes flashed, and his jaw acquired some strength, snapping the skin open in one bite. The flow of blood which entered his stomach was steady and strong, despite Draco’s weakened state.

Despite the blond teenager’s earliest style of life, he hadn’t experienced anything with the fair sex, and was considered a virgin in this aspect.

And it was true that virgin’s blood was the most powerful for a thirsty vampire, or part-vampire. If the virgin had been female, it would have been even stronger, but Harry wasn’t one to complain. He feasted on the other’s body as if he hadn’t eaten in days. Which was true, in fact.

Never before had Harry drunk blood from a human, especially not a wizard. The blood was intoxicating, and Draco, or the entity possessing him, had to kick him and pull on his own chains at the same time before being able to escape Harry's clutching hands. Draco's body was on the verge of exhaustion, now, and had just the strength to utter a last comment before falling unconscious.

"Now... use Lightning... to shield... the curse... discreetly... use it to... recover..."

Harry, a little better than before, understood the man's words and, licking Draco's last drop of blood from his mouth, he returned to lie in his corner just as a click resounded in the room.

Two Death Eaters entered, wands ready for the usual torture session.

Now that Harry was only simulating unconsciousness, he heard the dark wizards' words, and had to stifle a gasp when he understood what they were talking about.

"...and, after the Minister published his new law, they gathered the known werewolves, and killed them all." the first one was saying.

"When? I didn't read that in the papers." whined the other, audibly younger. "I so wanted to kill one!"

"The Master's spies reported it today; it should be in the papers tomorrow."

"So there's no more howling beast on the outside now?"

"There are a few, but reports say that it's only a tenth of their original number."

"Well, it's for the better, I say."

"Agreed. Now, let's take care of our little charge."

The two wizards chuckled darkly before one of them cast the pain curse on Harry. The teenager was shocked at the earlier dialogue, and he wanted desperately to ask question about Remus and Arthur. He couldn't fight yet, though, and had to wait. Malfoy had warned him of what to do, and he expected the curse. Knowing he had to keep the charade, he screamed and trashed around, but his now intimate knowledge of how the spell worked allowed him to reroute the pain messages from his nerves toward his elemental energy pool instead of his brain. After all, nerve messages were electricity too.

The two wizards continued to work the curse on him, unknowingly recharging his batteries.  
In a dusty and unordered office...

“The book is wrong.”

Hermione staggered back, blinking at the man in front of her, who had just uttered the terrible sentence. Never in her whole life had she put more trust than in books. Never had she thought of considering a book wrong. Her research from last year had allowed Snape to add to another book's content, not modify it. But the wizard in front of her was knowledgeable, especially in that domain, and if he said the book was wrong... well, she was completely lost.

“Sir?”

Albus Dumbledore, Master Alchemist, and only other person in the office, smiled sadly at her. “Imagine that the knowledge that Blood Magic was performable on everyone without a preliminary sample of their blood.”

She reflected about it for a second, eliciting another smile from the old professor. Albus had been sure that Hermione, told to reflect about knowledge, would do it. She raised her head and gazed at him frightfully.

“That would cause chaos.”

“Exactly. So, the books have been edited to protect the public.”

“But we can find him, then? How?”

“The blood ritual is only harder if it’s not his own blood. The difficulty increases with the difference between the target and the blood used.”

“We have to find the closest blood relative, then... that means... Megan?”

“I’m sure that young Miss Prunner will gladly provide some blood to find her brother. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time she’d be subjected to a blood ritual, if I recall correctly.”

Hermione had the grace to blush, before nodding. “I’ll fetch her, sir. I mean... is her fireplace still connected to the Floo system?”

Dumbledore shook his head, and his real age showed a bit more than before. Turning around to look through the window, he spoke slowly. “The Minister revoked all access from non-pureblood families. He invoked the lack of magical security measures in the muggle neighbourhoods. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear he’s in league with Voldemort.” He kept silent for several seconds, before lowering his head, muttering “In fact, I don’t know better. Arthur has switched. But... how? And why?”

“I believe I can answer this question, professor.” answered a male voice.

Although the creaky door was still closed, a fatigued George Weasley was standing in front of them, smiling tiredly.

After the initial shock of seeing someone else in the office, Dumbledore quickly recovered his wits.

“How did you enter?”

“I think it wasn’t your initial question, professor,” answered George. “Besides, my family is there too. Share a password?”

Dumbledore looked at the cheeky boy in shock, and absently gave him the password. "Righteous."

"Of course." answered George, before opening the door and shouting the password. A few seconds afterwards, Fred and Ron Weasley walked through the doorway, holding an exhausted Molly between them.

"Sweet Merlin! What happened?" asked Dumbledore.

The Weasleys didn't answer for a while. They seated Molly in the couch, before turning back toward the old professor. "Food." croaked Ron.

"What my brother wanted to ask politely, professor, is for us to get a bit of food and drink." Fred said, ignoring Ron's glare. "But, as you can see, we aren't in the best condition, and our little brother is a little parched."

"Of course." answered Albus, before calling "Mondy! Dimmy!"

To the two house-elves who appeared, he ordered to bring food and drinks for the four Weasleys. After they disappeared, he fire-called Madam Pomfrey to make a full health check on them.

While they ate, Albus created a round-trip portkey to the Prunners' place. Hermione left quickly, returning with Megan and her parents. The Prunners were no-nonsense muggles who thought it strange for a powerful professor to need an insignificant student for anything, especially during the summer. Hermione had felt forced to reveal a little of her intentions and, despite understanding the need, they demanded to watch the full ritual and Hermione, for speed's sake, had agreed. She also told them that they could live in the school for a few days, and that there were going to be other muggles there already. Hermione's parents, namely.

When the Grangers had reached their house after the trip back from Greece, they had only found a pile of rubble. Hermione had sought

her Headmistress, asking to be relocated and the accident investigated. Snape had then made a quick trip on the place, and had found dark magic residues, which led to the conclusion that Death Eaters knew about her and her family. Minerva had then agreed to lodge her parents as well.

Hermione shook herself, dismissing her distressing memories, and activated the portkey. After a quick round of introductions, the three Prunners sat on a conjured couch; Hermione sat at the desk, activating a Quick-Notes quill; and Poppy accompanied an exhausted and depressed Molly to the Hospital wing. The Weasleys brothers then began to relate their hectic return from Romania, shedding some light on the Minister's new way of acting.

Afterwards, Hermione explained the situation about Harry and Ginny, and the need for the closest relatives for a Blood Ritual allowing to locate someone. The Weasley twins proposed themselves immediately, while Ron looked lost in thoughts. Megan looked at her parents for their approval and then proposed herself too. Two chances were better than one.

A few hours later, Fred and George were crying silently, looking at the result displayed by the ritual. According to Hermione's interpretation, their only sister was dead. Albus, despite his tired state, confirmed this, and they all looked at Megan's resulting shapes of smoke expectantly.

It displayed a town, seen from above. The smoke moved several times, showing nearer and nearer views of the destination. After the whole town, it displayed its main street, in the centre of which stood a proud statue of a man with an eagle on his shoulder and a hanging rope in his right hand. The viewpoint then zoomed on one of the street's buildings, a small cottage, looking cosy despite the locked shutters. They then saw a complex maze of corridors, surely not the cottage's inside unless it was enlarged, and a place in the maze looked brighter as if it was their target. The last scene showed a body, unmistakably Harry's, lying on a stone bench, with two wizards aiming their wands at him.

The smoke had long since cleared before the onlookers dared speaking again. If what they saw was true, Harry wasn't very happy about the situation. Understatement of the millennium.

However, they had several hints about his location and, using a pensieve to replay the stone scenes at will, they began to search between the few wizard settlements at first, and didn't find one matching. They then started to look through the muggles towns, and, after a full day of them browsing through tomes of historical figures worthy of a statue, Fred shouted in joy. To the others who had stopped their reading, he spoke the paragraph aloud.

...and, despite Sir Jonas Hangle being the known murderer of sixteen innocent virgins, he brought victory and fame to the crown in the numerous skirmishes against the Scottish Highlanders, using his magic to win easily against his many opponents. The town around his ancestral home, which was later expanded into a manor, has been named Hangletown in his honour, in the year 1749. Fifty years later, the wizarding population, distraught by the Lord's constant use of the Dark Arts, brought down the manor's walls and the man died in it. He was a powerful figure, though, and is still seen as a hero by the muggles. He is often represented with his pet eagle and the rope with which he hung the people who disobeyed him.

He looked up, and noticed that Hermione wasn't in the raptly listening people around him. She had left for another part of the Library, and quickly came back with another book, titled "Olde World Atlas". She slammed the heavy book on the table, quieting the whispering about Fred's discovery, and began browsing through it.

When she arrived on a map of Great Britain, she pointed her wand on it, and spoke. "Locatio Hangletown."

A light escaped her wand, and explored the page quickly until it returned to the wand. From the page, two names were now written in sparkling gold.

Little Hangleton.

Greater Hangleton.

“Why-” started Megan, but Hermione interrupted her.

“These two towns are close to each other, and no doubt one had taken its name from the other. The name isn’t exactly the same, but we know that, etymologically, the suffix -town has often been shortened in -ton, especially in town names.”

She looked at the four other teenagers intently.

“We have our target, now. Let’s plan.”

And they did.  
A while later...

It had been a good plan. Sound and foolproof. But Murphy’s Law kicked again and the plan had revealed its lack of damnfoolproofness. The Death Eaters guarding the building had made an unexpected toilet break, and the three teens had been caught.

Hermione pulled at the chains in anger, but only succeeded in harming herself furthermore. Defeated, she slumped against the wall, wishing for the umpteenth time to have listened to Ron’s advice of waiting a few days. Fred and George were chained too, and George wasn’t able to pass through the rusty metal holding his hands. At least, Megan wasn’t held prisoner, being forbidden to come by Hermione.

She sighed, and shuddered in fright. The Death Eaters who had just left had described their incoming rounds of torture, and she wasn’t looking forward to it. Not at all. George was restless, and Fred was still unconscious, a result from his wounds.

They didn’t know that, at the same time, two supposed enemies were reaching an agreement.

Harry looked at the old man, clad in expensive dark green robes. He didn’t trust him. Because of his still weakened state, he couldn’t go

through the man's mental shields, but the man's demeanour, screaming his disgust, was a clear indication of his feelings.

The man's proposal, though, despite reeking of treachery, was interesting enough to take into account. He had learnt, through the Death Eaters' gloating insults, that his friends had been captured during the night, and the man in front of him just proposed to help him free them. Only him would help him in the enlarged maze of corridors, knowing where they were held and where was the exit.

He could have waited to replenish his energy a few days, but Voldemort was almost completely healed and had a new wand, and he didn't want to tempt fate.

"Okay. I'll do it. Mr... ?" said Harry.

The man hesitated. It wasn't the first time that a wizard asked his name, and he knew that he couldn't give it unless he wanted a riot. He couldn't really lie to Harry, though, as the boy's ancestor had put a spell on him so that he couldn't lie to his bloodline.

"Call me... Sly."

Harry's eyebrows shot up, but he shrugged. "Okay, Mr Sly. So... what do you want me to do?"

Sly smiled. "I know some things about you. You can change your body and face and, with the current security measures around the Ministry, you are the only one able to enter the building under the identity of the Minister."

"But... why would I do that?" asked Harry, still flabbergasted about the man's knowledge of his powers.

"Weasley is terrorizing everyone there, and granted himself access to all the services. By entering the building with his face, you'll be able to enter them as well."

"What for? What do you need me for?"

“There is an item belonging to me, and it had been taken away. It looks like a pensieve, but it's bigger, and its content is ashen. When you find it, under no circumstance will you bring the content to your head.”

“Why?”

“Well... let's just say... it's not exactly memories.”

“What is it, then?” Harry's was curious about the man's reluctance, and that made him more eager to know about it.

“I can't tell you. You wouldn't believe me, anyway.”

“Try me. We're going to be partners in this, so I'd better know everything about it. I won't move from here until you tell me.”

Sly sighed. The boy's innate stubbornness, undoubtedly inherited from his many-times-grandfather, was starting to wear on him.

“Very well. But I warned you. Keep yourself in check afterwards. I'll project some thoughts in your mind to better explain, and to show you the item as well. Ready?”

“As ready as one can be.”

“Legilimens.”

Sly was a tad shocked upon seeing Harry's mind defence, but he sent the chosen memories nonetheless. The fact that the pensieve wasn't a pensieve but a soul repository. The fact that he, Sly, needed it to live. The fact that Sly created the Dementors and the Adava Kedavra spell for the unique goal of filling the item. The fact that one's soul could be exchanged with another and that what had certainly happened to the Minister. Sly then extracted himself from the boy's mind, and witnessed Harry as he exited the trance. To the man's surprise, the boy wasn't angered or anything. Actually, he was... ecstatic?

“Is it true?” asked Harry, a large smile on his face.

“What?”

“What you sent me! Is it true?”

“Yes. And don’t think you can make me die if you don’t fetch it for me! I would ask Riddle to level the whole building, but he’s too concerned by his dreams of grandeur to help me at the moment. It would only take me more time, and you’d be dead in between. So. What do you say?”

Harry thought about it. Hard. But he was still smiling.

“I agree, but I have one condition.”

“What could you ever ask as condition?”

“You have to release each and every soul which belonged to an innocent victim, and give some particular ones to me.”

Sly thought about it, and reflected that, because of the many Azkaban prisoners’ souls in the receptacle, as well as the early victims of the spell, not all of them being spotless, he would still have enough to live for several centuries.

He looked at the expectant face looking up at him, and smirked.  
“Agreed.”

“And I want to see you doing it.”

The man’s thin eyebrows shot up in surprise. Was Harry doubting his word? Was he more Slytherin than his ancestry suggested? He had perhaps misjudged the boy... He nodded slowly, however, wanting the deal on its tracks.

“Last thing,” said Harry, “how do I know you aren’t going to join Voldemort afterwards?”

“I don’t partake in his power lust. I wanted him to help me getting the souls vessel, but he wouldn’t listen, even after I helped him. I just want to live freely and to explore the world. It must have changed in the last... since my imprisonment.”

“Why were you imprisoned?”

“It’s amusing that you, of all people, ask me the question.”

“Why?”

“ Still that stubborn?” At Harry’s frantic nod, he sighed, and continued. “I might tell you one day, after we finish this.”

“Okay, then.” said Harry, suddenly serious. “Let’s go hunting.”

“Wait. Take this.”

He gave Harry a medallion in the form of a snake.

“I finished making this yesterday, but, because of the new Ministry’s regulation, I can’t enter to use it. If you put it in your palm, it will turn toward the device.”

Harry thanked him with a silent nod, and they prepared to leave. They didn’t have time to move much, though, as two sets of footsteps, accompanied with Death Eater voices, approached the cell door. Harry looked at Sly, who nodded back before retreating in the farthest corner of the room.

The two men entered, before closing the door behind them. They then walked toward the lying body of Harry, intent on continuing their torture. However, when Harry turned over, a wide smile on his face, they staggered back.

“Dormare.”

The two black-robed wizards fell in an undignified heap on the floor, revealing a smirking Sly behind them.

They disrobed them and Harry changed into black robes, agreeing to Sly crudely transfiguring one of them into Harry, adding glamour charms to complete the illusion.

Harry stood up, and looked at the prone form of the older-looking Draco Malfoy. Since his gift of blood, the man hadn't woken up, and was shivering on his straw bed. Harry looked at Sly.

"Can you levitate him? The wands of these two idiots don't work with me."

The man looked at him, then at Malfoy, then back at him. "Why would you help a Malfoy? I thought you were a Gryffindor?"

Despite the audible venom behind his ancestor's name, Harry smirked. "He helped me, I'm repaying a debt."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because, otherwise, I stay here." said Harry, his stubborn pout in place as he sat down again.

The man looked at him in appraisal. After several seconds, he aimed his wand at Draco. "Corpus Mobile."

Harry looked surprised at the man's use of unusual incantations, but hid it and stood next to him at the cell doorway.

They then navigated their way in the corridors. When they met a patrol of six Death Eaters, Sly told them they were bringing the unconscious Malfoy into another cell. They knew about Sly's presence, on the premises, so they didn't say anything when they passed them.

Harry and Sly heard the screams from several corridors away, and Harry wanted to run, but Sly held him back, shaking his head. The

boy understood that they had to surprise their opponents, and quietly followed Sly. They walked quicker, though.

The three Death Eaters who were taking their pleasure torturing the teens didn't perceive the entrance of the two intruders, and fell down quickly, two of them victims of Sly's sleeping spell while one was stunned by an intense burst of electricity from Harry.

Even after freeing them from the chains, it took a while to calm Hermione and the Weasley twins, and Harry made good use of his elemental vision and powers to block the pain messages that were still coursing through the teens' bodies. After a few minutes, they finally were able to stand more or less upright and, searching the prone bodies that were once again transfigured to take their place, they found wands more or less useable to defend themselves. Sly used his own to cast silencing spells on their feet, as well as disillusionment spells, and they finally left the room, locking the door after them.

The group passed through the maze of corridors again, meeting a few patrols on the way, and Sly used the same excuse as earlier, pretending to move Draco into another cell. Only when they neared the exit did he cast a disillusionment spell on him too, and they advanced into the cottage's entrance corridor...

...only to find themselves in front of ten wands raised their way.

"What are you doing with them?" asked a cold female voice, dripping with contempt.

The question was obviously directed at Sly, for he just shrugged, hiding his wand motion.

"Protecto." he uttered, while the teenagers following him prepared themselves.

The younger team was disadvantaged by numbers, energy, and experience. They were also unable to resist the unblockable curses sent their way. Harry resisted the Cruciatus, but the effort of

redirecting the pain messages took out his mobility and awareness. He was only aware of several spell beams passing by. Only when the Cruciatus stopped was he able to focus on his surroundings again.

And he gasped. Fred and George were on the ground, half-buried in rubble undoubtedly from an explosion curse. Draco was in the same state as before. Sly was still battling the Death Eaters despite being the target of several spells at the same time. And Hermione...

Hermione was slumped next to him. Unmoving and not breathing. He suddenly remembered the green beam headed his way, and a shape getting in the way.

He knew that something had to be done. He knew that something could be done. But he had had enough of this mindless fight to think properly right now.

“Who do you think you ARE?” he yelled, tears threatening, and the welling emotions making his head swim. The Death Eaters weren’t part of the ones in the throne room when he had portkeyed inside, and they failed to take heed of his glinting eyes.

Sly recognized the signs, though, and retreated out of Harry’s way.

It was a good decision, because a split second afterwards, several lightning bolts shot forward from Harry, shocking half of the Death Eaters into unconsciousness, and burning the other half heavily. Only two remained standing afterwards, although they were quite stunned at the display. Harry fell down afterwards, breathing heavily, having spent a good deal of his elemental energy, leaving Sly to take care of the remaining dark wizards.

Sly exited the cottage, sure now that he would never be allowed inside again. Not that he couldn’t find a way in, though. But he didn’t care. His only thought, now, was his precious soul vessel.

Levitating the bodies of everyone except Harry, who was holding his arm to stand, he walked down the street, only to find himself in front of another row of wizards aiming their wands at him.

“Whoever you are, drop your wand and release the kids, and you won’t be harmed!” shouted a stern female voice, visibly used to obedience. Harry and Sly then made the exact same gesture: they rolled their eyes, although it was for different reasons. Harry thought that old professor McGonagall was perhaps taking herself too seriously. And Sly... let’s just say that his long imprisonment had made him rather disobedient toward this particular kind of order. He turned toward Harry.

“Remember our deal. I’ll be at the Leaky Cauldron tomorrow evening.”

That left just a bit more than 24 hours for Harry to rest, get himself a weapon and a plan, and actually retrieve the device. The teen nodded, though. He felt he owed it to everyone who died unjustly. Seeing Harry’s nod, Sly levitated the bodies down, straightened up...

...and disappeared.

As soon as he left, the teenagers were swarmed with adults guessing their state, shouting at one another to bring healing tapes, or a potion or two. Harry knelt next to Hermione, and let his tears finally flow. He knew he had to find the strange object Sly had described, but he wasn’t sure if it was working at all. He wanted Hermione back. He wanted Ginny back. Speaking of whom...

“Harry, where is Ginny?”

He looked up, and saw Albus Dumbledore’s pained face. The man had difficulties to stand up, and was sitting on a levitating chair, the charmed seat flying him wherever he wanted. The pain wasn’t physical, then, and Harry suspected that the man already knew about her fate. He wasn’t ready to tell him everything, though, and merely shrugged, before turning to Hermione again.

“Is she...?”

Harry thought about it. On the one hand, he didn’t want to tell Dumbledore about the pensieve, fearing that the man would prevent

him from going there. On the other hand, the man perhaps already knew about it, and he would be of invaluable help. He went for a mixed truth.

“She’s not dead... yet.” he said in a strained voice.

Albus looked at the lack of breathing, the whiteness and stillness of the prone teenager, and, short of a medical examination, couldn’t find any hint of life.

“Care to elaborate?”

“I have to do something... to release her. And I have to do it quickly. Can I use your fireplace for a trip in Diagon Alley tomorrow? And can you host everybody at the Hospital Wing in the meantime? Fred and George were hit by an explosion curse, I think.”

“You don’t want to talk about what you have to do?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I really can’t.” judging by McGonagall’s earlier words of welcome toward Sly, he supposed that they wouldn’t be keen of him gallivanting in the Ministry under an assumed identity to retrieve a cursed item. And Harry wanted the man alive and free so that he could release the bargained souls.

“Ah, well. We aren’t that far from Hogwarts, and the Hospital Wing is available for you and your friends, of course.” The man’s gaze went to the blond form lying with the others. “Do you know anything about Mr Malfoy’s state?”

“No, sir.” answered Harry. It was the only answer he could produce without squirming under the inquisitive gaze of his previous Headmaster.

Half an hour after everybody left Little Hangleton, an angry shout could be heard in the whole village.  
In a small room between two opposite kingdoms...

“Why did you help them?” asked one of the players.

The other man looked around. The room’s walls were now displaying several modern art paintings. “Thou hast thine time to do so, so did I.” he answered absently.

The other one returned to the contemplation of the chess board.

After a few minutes, the older-looking man spoke up again. “Had I not, the whole game would have been a moot point. I cannot afford to lose my most important piece right now. Besides, thou art the one who suggested to our little thief to ally with him.”

“Well... I knew that your protégé would have asked for the removal of several hundreds of souls.” Thirteen sighed. “Sometimes, I wish we could intervene bodily on that wretched planet.”

“Thou knoweth we cannot. The rules have been set up way before our arrival. Back to the lost souls problem, dost thou have a plan to recover them?”

The black-clad androgyn looked up and smirked at his counterpart. “I might just have the one.”

The next morning, Hogwarts’ infirmary...

Harry had arrived in the Hospital Wing the afternoon before, in a weakened state, and Madam Pomfrey had given him several replenishing potions, seeming to struggle all the time between protective attitude and acid comments. After sipping a Dreamless Sleep potion, though, Harry had escaped her protectiveness for a well-deserved rest. After sleeping for twelve hours straight, Harry woke up as soon as the sun hit the window, and went to leave the infirmary. However, when he opened the door, he found himself face-to-face with Minerva McGonagall. He hadn’t heard the stern woman’s approach, but reflected that it might be normal for a cat animagus not to make noise while walking. He wondered if he could speak about shape-shifting with her. Perhaps, when everything would be taken care of, they would have an interesting conversation. For now, though,

it was only strained, as she still wasn't over his constant disappearances and lack of respect.

"Morning, Mr Potter."

"Good morning, Professor."

"Care for breakfast?"

"Of course."

They walked toward the Great Hall in silence for a few minutes, until Minerva couldn't hold it anymore.

"What were you thinking, really, going there like that? If we hadn't sent a rescue mission, you-"

He snorted, interrupting her. "Rescue mission? I'll tell you what happened. As soon as I arrived, Ginny was killed. For Voldemort, she was there only to catch me. I couldn't do anything about it, but I think I avenged her death." He stopped and sighed, before continuing. "They tortured me for that, though." he said, indicating his white hair.

Several seconds went by, before he walked again, with his former teacher on his side. "The children who came to save me were caught and tortured as well. Only thanks to... to the man you saw outside, were we able to escape."

"Who is he, Harry?"

He looked at the floor. "I don't know. I really don't know. But I get the vague impression that I should know him, somewhat."

The breakfast went by in silence, the other teachers not used to see Harry and not knowing what had happened. As soon as it was finished, Harry went to the Headmistress' office, where he could Floo outside. Minerva, who had reconstructed the stone gargoyle thanks to the castle's own magic, didn't want it destroyed a second time and ran to his side.

Outside, they found Albus who apparently had had breakfast early in his office and who seemed to want a chat with Harry. Minerva had to yell the password for the gargoyle to open – being quite new, its hearing was still difficult – and they climbed the ascending stairs, the two younger ones helping Dumbledore on the way.

“So, Harry,” started Albus, “I couldn’t stop noticing the fact that you didn’t appear to have a wand. Besides, if you had, the Ministry would have found you quickly, with their...”

“...truly annoying service of underage magic.” finished Harry. “I know, Professor. I seldom used wand magic at all.”

Albus seemed interested. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“I’m sorry, Professor Dumbledore. This particular talk will need a long time and I’m rather busy today. It will have to wait.”

“It’s alright, my boy. It can wait. But, as soon as possible, I’d like you to meet Minerva and me first, then the other teachers, to give us your insights about what you can do. The reports...” Albus started, before stopping short, slightly blushing.

Harry chortled. “I know that Hermione informed you of our meetings, sir. I knew that she would when I asked that no teacher was present. I’m sorry but my memories weren’t clear and I wasn’t quite ready to face some of you.” He lowered his head, muttering “I obviously can, now.”

The Headmistress, who had listened to that point, had caught the teenager’s last sentence and huffed. “That’s for sure, you did raise quite the turmoil afterwards, too. Why did you have to break in, though? You could have entered using Hermione’s way.”

“Hermione’s way?” asked Harry, while Albus looked at Minerva with curiosity painted on his face.

“She told me recently that she once talked to the gargoyle as she would have done with her parents’ secretary. Just stating one’s name

and intent seems to be sufficient for the gargoyle to open.” She stopped suddenly, putting her finger to her chin. “That was before it was destroyed, though. I wonder if it still works.”

“You’ll have to try, then.” answered Harry. “Now, can I go?”

“A last question, Harry, if you would?” said Dumbledore. “What about Voldemort?”

“What about him? Well... let’s start:” said Harry, counting on his fingers. “First, he kidnaps my girlfriend. Second, he kills her before my eyes.” Two gasps. “Third, I release an explosion able to kill at least twenty Death Eaters and throw their leader through the window. Judging by the time it took for him to see me afterwards, he must have spent a long time recovering. Fourth, several children come to my rescue but are imprisoned and tortured. Fifth, we are all rescued by a man whom you welcomed with your wands.”

“Who is that man, Harry?” asked Minerva.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. He didn’t tell me his name. He only asked to be called Sly.”

“Sly... Sly...” said Dumbledore pensively. He knew that there was something escaping his mind at that moment, and he vaguely nodded when Harry asked the next question.

“Can I go, now, Professors?”

Minerva looked at Albus’ thoughtful expression and, sighing, she gave the pot of Floo powder to Harry who took a handful.

“I hope you know what you are doing, Harry.” she said in guise of good-bye.

“As always.” was the cryptic answer, before Harry threw the powder to his feet, shouting “The Leaky Cauldron.”

Minerva sighed, before saying “That’s what I didn’t want to hear.”

She then turned toward Albus, who was frowning, trying to put his finger on the thing that had escaped him. Unsuccessfully.

A bit later...

It was still quite early when Harry entered Gringotts. He had reflected that the Ministry employees would find it strange if their leader would appear too early in the morning, asking bizarre questions. Harry had then thought about spending a short time in Diagon Alley. First, to the goblins to ask if they knew about the location of his grandmother's house. Judging by her journal, it was probably in ruins but, if the indications were accurate, the trapdoor leading to his refuge was there. And he knew the time frame was on par with the reality, so he should be able to enter.

The bank was quite empty, and Harry thought it was due to the early hour, but he quickly found the reason. Or rather, the reason was said to him, quite rudely.

"What do you want, human?" asked the teller he had gone to. "It's a displeasure to serve you today. Especially since your kin wouldn't recognize our rights."

Stunned by the angry outburst, Harry completely forgot why he had come. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, and don't act as if you don't know! It's been plastered on the first page of your rag of a daily so-called newspaper."

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said respectfully, and the goblin's ears perked, "but I don't know anything about all that. I was out of the magical world for a while, and, frankly, I'm still off with some of it. And I don't read the rag you mentioned."

The goblin calmed a little. What if the kid was right? Still... "For your information, then, your Minister had issued laws against each and every non-human species, restricting their movement and such. See?

We have to wear this symbol on our clothes at all times.” he said, pointing to something that had escaped Harry’s notice earlier.

A yellow star.

Harry looked at the star with widening eyes and paled, his mind replaying his History class. He tried to speak, but his mouth closed and opened like a fish, and no sound escaped his lips. Either the boy was a good actor, thought the goblin, or he was genuinely shocked.

Harry recovered his usual expression, although a little paler than usual. He now had an additional reason to get to the Minister. With a now intent gaze, flashing with power, he looked at the goblin in front of him.

“I’ll take care of that, you have my word.”

“And who might you be to take care of the Minister of Magic?” asked the goblin.

Harry looked around to make sure that nobody was looking at him or overhearing, and morphed his features to make his famous scar appear. He wanted to change his eyes and hair back to their usual colour too, but his treatment at the hands of the Death Eaters had cost him much, and he only succeeded in changing his hair from white to a dull grey. When he spoke next, though, it was the goblin’s turn to look flabbergasted.

“Harry Potter.”

“But... but... Harry Potter is... dead?” the last word was asked with fear in his voice, as if saying it would make the teen disappear, the very teen who had just promised to take care of their current problem. Visibly, the goblin hadn’t been made aware of Harry’s resurrection.

“I was almost dead, yes. And I wasn’t reachable for a long time afterwards. But I’m here, now, and I have one important request.”

“Of course, Mr Potter.” answered the goblin, retrieving his good manners. After all, if the boy was going to help them, he would help him to the best of his abilities.

“I know goblins keep track of properties as well as vaults, and I need to know the location of my grandmother’s house. My father’s mother. Her name’s Ginevra Shaun.”

The goblin wrote something on one of his charmed scrolls and, after several seconds, the answer appeared. The goblin frowned for a second, cleared the scroll, and started again. When the answer came again, the goblin stared at it silently for a long time, until Harry interrupted him. The teen had witnessed the scene but wasn’t able to look at the scroll, and he was curious.

“What?”

The goblin looked at him and blinked. He stayed silent for a few more seconds, as if trying to formulate the scroll’s content. He finally spoke, looking at the scroll a few times in the process.

“It might come as a surprise. When the house was reduced to rubble, it took quite some time to manage the legalities of your grandmother’s death. Someone visibly decided that the spot was a good place to build a house. After all, most wizards prefer a secluded spot, far away from prying muggles.”

“Why would my grandmother like a place far from muggles? She was teaching a muggle-related subject.”

“She also has a flat in muggle London, but I suspect it’s not the place you are looking for. As for the reasons for her liking the place, it’s perhaps because it’s in the middle of a calm forest.”

“Alright. What about the current owner?”

“That is the surprise. It seems that the current inhabitants had decided to build a manor there, without clearing the legalities first. Their house is right next to the ruins of your grandmother’s house,

because they didn't want to clear them. Or they simply weren't able to. At that time, word has spread that your grandmother was a very special witch, Harry. And if she has cursed her house, nobody would be able to overcome it."

He coughed a bit, and continued. "However, anything built on a private property is deemed to belong to the property's owner, whatever the size of the building. As they are wizards, they quickly built an impressive manor, and certainly hoped to live there for the time being. After all, after 32 years of living on a site, the site is deemed your property."

"Why 32 years? How much time went by?"

"32 years is a quarter of a life. Well... for us goblins, anyway, it's the quarter of our life expectancy. As for how much time... let's see..." he said, reading the scroll intently. "They started to occupy the site soon after your grandmother's death. As if they knew about it already. That happened in September 1972. We are now in August 1994, so that makes... 32 years. Minus one month."

"Why didn't my dad or granddad do anything?"

"Your grandmother wasn't living there full-time." said the goblin, browsing through the scroll again. "She shared her time between it and Potter's place in Godric's Hollow, where your grandfather lived. And your parents, afterwards. The Potters hadn't realized about the other house, and didn't reclaim it."

"Who are the current inhabitants? And is it possible for me to reclaim the place?" Harry asked. Because the Hideaway's mere existence, he knew he had to go there, and the easiest way was to own the house. His qualms about uprooting a wizarding family calmed themselves when he heard the goblin's answer.

"That's why I was surprised at first. They always told everyone that it was their ancestral house. As his father is reputedly dead, the current wizard inhabitant is Draco Malfoy, accompanied with 12 house-elves."

The Malfoys! If he had known about it in his early years, Harry would have had fun expelling them from his grandmother's property. His surprise prevented him from hearing the rest, and he made the goblin repeat.

"As you are the sole heir of your grandmother, you can reclaim it, and the manor would then be yours."

"I'm not sure about living in a place where Malfoys have dwelt..." started Harry, before remembering Malfoy's earlier help, as well as his current state. He hung his head in shame, and promised himself that, even if the house would soon be his, he would let Draco inhabit it. Perhaps the Weasley could be able to use it. After all, they were quite numerous, and the Burrow was barely standing upright.

"Very well. How?" asked Harry.

The goblin smiled at the teen's eagerness and produced the very scroll he had been surprised at. A line was already present at the bottom of it. "By signing this form. We'll then be able to bring you there for your first visit."

"I'll sign. However, I'll go there tomorrow, not today, as I've work to do." said Harry, looking pointedly at the goblin's infamous decoration.

The goblin understood and, after receiving the signed form, wished Harry success in his transactions – a standard goblin parting saying, but it acquired a new meaning that day.

Just before leaving the bank, Harry morphed into Gabriel and headed for Ollivander's. If he wanted to infiltrate the Ministry, he would need a weapon. After entering the now familiar shop, he was greeted by the old man.

"Hey! Gabriel! How are you today, young man? It has been a while since our last meeting. I don't know what you have done with your hair, but that colour doesn't suit you. And you should spend some time under the sun, too."

“...says the man who spends all his time in his back office.” Harry joked, despite the burning memories of what had caused his hair and skin’s paleness.

“Whatever you say.” waved the man as if it wasn’t important. “Now, are you ready to make your wand? I already prepared the workplace. Days ago, in fact. And the cores are sufficiently soaked now to be useable.”

“I’ll do that, then. Can I make two in one go?”

“Ambitious, aren’t we? We’ll see if you have time.”

Harry inspired deeply and exhaled, before going to work under the watchful gaze of Ollivander. As it was his first wands, he was extra careful and focussed. The different wood sticks were in front of him already, properly cut and hollowed on one side by the old man, the other side being the wand handle, already made too. Harry passed his hand on top of them, felt an attraction and closed his eyes to select the proper ones. 12-inch hard teak for the first, and 13-inch supple holly for the second. Like his first wand. He then mixed the core with the appropriate substances and poured the result in the holly wand before corking it with the appropriate transparent glue and letting it rest for the needed hour.

Just as he was going to do the same thing for the second, he got a hunch and looked around for Ollivander to confirm it. The old man had left in the meantime, though, and, judging by the voices he heard at the front of the shop, he was selling a wand. That could take time, and Harry followed his hunch. Taking a knife nearby, he sliced himself and poured a bit of his blood on the core preparation. After healing himself, he poured the bubbling result in the hollowed out teak stick. As he was corking it like the first, he felt that the wand was vibrating with power. Teak was a solid wood, and Harry was quite content with his choice, but he wasn’t sure if the wood would hold should he use it. Having another idea, he looked around and noticed several tools cast aside. Some were made of platinum, others were golden, silvery, or just plain steel. It all depended on the wood and

core used. As he was looking at the tools, a glint caught his eyes. In a nearby box, several gems were reflecting the light, and Harry remembered Ollivander's current research topic. There was always means to improve wands, and the old man had recently come up with the idea of topping a wand with a crystal. His problem was that he couldn't find a good way to attach the crystal to the wand top. It was either too fragile or plainly blocking the magic. Harry thought that, with metal around it, a wand could be topped with a crystal with no problem.

Harry thought about the compatibility chart Ollivander had taught him, and selected a pair of scissors made of pure platinum, as well as a diamond cut in the form of a lens. He put them on the workspace and headed for the farthest corner of the back office, where rested the potter's stool. The rotating table was there to make moulds for metal handles. Using the appropriate clay and distilled water, it took Harry three tries to make the 12-inch high cast, before he could let it rest in the magical oven nearby for the appropriate fifteen minutes. After that time, Harry took the teak wand with pliers and inserted it into the cast. He then carefully put the diamond lens at the end and took the platinum scissors with trembling hands. From here, he thought, anything could work very fine, fail lamely, or even go completely haywire. Thinking about it, he left the back office and entered the adjoining test chamber. It was a fireproof room, protected from most side effects of spells. In the middle of it, there was a table which top was in the purest marble, and which legs were metal poles encased in both the marble top and the stone floor. Harry put the wand cast on the table and, verifying a last time that the lens was properly positioned and that the wand was in the exact middle of the cast, he concentrated and released his elemental energy into the platinum scissors in his hand. It took him quite a while, but the thing finally began to glow from the heat and melted into the cast. Harry was completely focussed, and the hand who had held the scissors didn't suffer from the heat. The cast cracked a bit under the heat and pressure, but held. When it was finished, Harry exhaled the breath he hadn't been aware of keeping, and sat down, waiting for the platinum to cool off.

During that time, he returned to the back office and listened at the shop. Either there were several customers that day, or it was a

difficult one, as at least half an hour had gone between his checks. Harry smiled, remembering the time he had needed to get his first wand. He quickly cleared the workspace and then fetched the book he needed from the small bookcase. It was small but the books there were the only few needed by a wand maker. Reading the section on unusual wand core, Harry confirmed that it was possible to use blood in wand cores, despite the generally unstable results. Using a weak blood generally made the wand useless, while using a strong creature's blood could make the wand explode. The results of using a person's blood really depended on that person, and no serious study had been made on that topic, after the death of three wand makers. However, one particular case had been encountered where the person's blood, although not making the wand any different, prevented anyone else to use it.

After his half-hour of reading, Harry stored the book where it came from and went to his holly wand. He took it with a trembling hand, and was quite satisfied that it felt good instantaneously. He waved it around and sparks appeared, signalling his compatibility. He put it in his pocket, and went to the test room, wondering about the other one. He was half tempted to ask Ollivander to watch over him, but wanted to test his hunches first. He delicately broke the clay cast with a small hammer and took the wand with pliers. The result wasn't really beautiful, and Harry concentrated again, sending heating lightning toward the metal coating the wand. After ten minutes of doing so, the wand was looking quite beautiful, sleek and shiny. His heart pounding in his chest, Harry finally took the wand in his hand.  
In the shop proper...

Ollivander was tired. It was quite unusual to have several muggle-born students in his shop at once, but this year, it seemed that several of them knew each other already, and had decided to come with their entire families. On top of selecting wands for the three youngsters, the old man had had to answer the question from the anxious adults and the happy kids. On top of that, it had taken him quite a long time to find a proper wand for them, and he still had the third one to satisfy. He sighed. Purebloods were easier, as they generally followed their parents' tracks, and it left him with half a dozen possibilities only. These ones were... well, let's say it took him

a long time. An hour and a half already, and he was desperate to get back to Gabriel's own wand making.

It was during these thoughts, just as the third kid was taking the umpteenth wand in his hand that he felt an enormous surge of magic. The surrounding light went brighter for a few seconds, wind swirled all around, and wands rattled on the counter, some of them falling on the floor.

To Ollivander's alarmed face, the girl in front of him smiled. "That was so cool! It means it's mine, yes?"

The man was stuck in a dilemma, looking like a deer in headlights. Taking the difficult decision, he started to tell them to leave and pushed them to the door, taking the wand from the girl. The surge hadn't come from the girl, but from behind. From his back office. And, judging by its power, it must have been felt a mile around. Just as the adults finally stopped complaining, a voice stopped the old man.

"I'm alright."

Everybody swirled around, noticing the teenage boy standing by the counter, on wobbly legs.

"I'm alright." he repeated, before sitting heavily on the stool nearby. It took another dozen of tries for the girl to get a proper wand, and Harry felt Ollivander's eyes on his neck all the time. After the families left, he locked the door and closed the curtains before leading Gabriel to the back, looking for traces of the wand making. Gabriel had cleaned everything there, though, and the old man turned around.

"What was it?"

The teenager smiled, and slowly, ever so slowly, he extracted his wand from his sleeve, in front of a shocked man.

"I had three unusual ideas for this one. The other wand is fine with me already, and I wanted to experiment."

“Ideas? Three?” uttered the old man weakly, before sitting on a chair.

“Yes. The first one was to include my blood in the core.”

“But... but...”

“I know. I read the book, afterwards. However, judging by the surge you felt, it should work.”

“And the other ideas?”

“As soon as I closed it, the wand started to vibrate, and I wanted to ensure the teak wouldn’t break with the power.”

“Teak is one of the solidest woods used for wands.”

“I wanted something to encase it, though, and it allowed me the perfect mean to attach the third idea.”

“Which was?”

“Look at the end.”

The old man looked, squinting his eyes to see better. When he recognized the glint, his eyes widened and he sat back on his chair.

“You used a gem?”

“Yes. You always found them interesting but fragile. The metal casing allows for enhanced sturdiness.”

The old man was speechless for several seconds. “But, how did you... I mean... the metal...”

Harry wasn’t sure of how much he could tell the old wizard, but his thoughts were interrupted by an insistent knocking sound coming from the shop door. As they both stood up, a voice came from behind

the door. "Open! In the name of the Minister, open that door, old fool! We know you're here!"

Ollivander and Harry looked at each other, before the old man spoke. "I'd better go there. You stay here. They are probably here because of the surge, but I'm sure they want more. The Aurors have changed these last days, and not for the best."

"But... what if..."

"Oh, they'll surely take me with them. Don't do anything foolish. Especially with that wand." he said, pointing to the one with the gem. "I told you about my research, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, hide."

He left Harry and went to the front door. As soon as he opened it, a Stunner hit him and he fell on the ground. While the Aurors' leader advanced toward the man, his wand drawn, the two younger Aurors behind him whispered with one another.

"Are we allowed to attack without reading the riot act, now?"

"It seems that the Minister issued a decree to that extent. Yesterday, I think. It pertains to 'dangerous use of magic' and the culprits are sent to prison right away."

During that brief exchange, their leader took Ollivander's wand and shoved it into his belt, before ordering his two underlings to take the man to the Ministry, where he would be interrogated properly.

The man then strolled inside the empty shop, closed the door, and proceeded to empty the counter of Ollivander's cash register. He didn't notice the approaching teenager until a strange-looking wand was aimed in his way.

"What-" he started, getting his own wand in hand.

He was late, though, and Harry merely muttered the Stunner incantation.

Now, you see, the Stunner isn't generally a Banishing spell. Harry's wand, though, intensified the spell, and the gem at the end acted exactly like Ollivander had predicted. Instead of a spell beam coming from the teenager's wand, a large cone was covered by the spell. And it was so powerful that the man was sent flying in the air until he hit the side wall, before sliding to the ground. Every loose item in the spell cone was also pushed away, and Harry even had to step back because of the recoil.

When everything settled down, only one word escaped Harry's lips.

“Wicked.”

Shaking himself awake, he went to the still-breathing man and levitated him into the test room. Once there, he disrobed him, removing the wrist wand holder on the way, recognizing the 'jumping wand' model from his short time at the nearby shop. It was a model equipped with a spring mechanism which, upon a certain wrist movement, made the wand shoot forward. Once the man was completely harmless, he tied him to one of the table's metal legs and moved everything outside of the room.

After fetching a mirror and shedding his own clothes, he returned inside and morphed his features into the man's, before leaving the room again, locking the test room door behind him. He then strapped the wand holders to his wrists and practised the movement allowing the wand to jump to his hand. Once acquainted with them, he put the man's wands on an unidentified shelf and stored his own in the wand holders. He then put on the man's uniform, checked the man's wallet, and stored Ollivander's wand in his belt. He also grasped the store's spare key from its location on the highest shelf of the bookcase.

With a last look around, he exited the back office just as two rookie Aurors in their early twenties entered the shop.

“What?” he snarled.

“Sorry, sir.” said one of them, standing at attention.

“The Underage Service signalled a spell cast here.”

“I’m alone, here. Do I look like underage to you?” he asked brusquely.

“No, sir.”

“Not at all.”

They were sweating. The man in front of them was known in the Aurors for his ruthlessness. He had been kept in the lowest ranks for a long time, until the Minister suddenly decided to promote him, and the man was now having the rank of Captain, associated with the privilege of answering directly to the Minister. Harry didn’t know about all this, but their frightened state told him of the man’s reputation.

“Scamper off, then.” he barked. “There’s nobody here other than me.”

After they left, he positioned the ‘Closed’ sign and locked the door.

His next and last stop before leaving Diagon Alley was a small shop where he would find the one object necessary for the discreet nature of his quest. Entering the shop under the man’s guise, he had to constantly remind himself about not to smile to the gentle storeowners. He quickly found and bought a trunk with the desired properties: shrinkable, with a gravity spell to hold everything correctly inside, and the size of the sought after device. Using a card he had noticed in the man’s wallet, he sent the bill to the Ministry, and left with the trunk in his pocket, shrunk to the size of a card deck.

At the Leaky Cauldron, he took a quick lunch under the suspicious gazes of the people around. Visibly, the Aurors didn’t seem to get that much respect nowadays, Harry thought. Quickly paying for his meal, he exited the pub through the muggle entrance. After walking the

whole way, he found the phone booth and composed the magic number. After a long while, a woman answered, quite surprised. It seemed that few people were using that entry nowadays.

Nevertheless, Harry told the woman the name of the man he was impersonating, and she let him in.  
At the same time, in the Headmistress' office...

The old man hadn't moved in the last few hours. His disabled state was a good excuse for it, but the man had simply been sifting through his 150 years of memories, trying to find the elusive one. Even when the house-elves popped in to put a meal on the table in front of him, he didn't move.

A short time afterwards, though, the man's eyes came alive again. They held no sparkle, though, because the shocking thought he had unearthed, after having pushed it on the outskirts of his mind for a long time, was linked with a recent memory.

Albus Dumbledore knew who Sly was. And he didn't want Harry around that particular man.

To be continued in next chapter: Judgement Day...

If you count carefully,  
Only two threads remain, now.  
I'll unravel them fully  
Soon. Please review, and you'll know.

## Chapter 37 – Judgement Day

Harry hid his wonderment at the beautiful Ministry atrium, and his surprise at the wand levelled to his chest. Upon recognizing him, the wand lowered and the woman who had received his call stuttered.

“I’m sorry, sir. I thought it was somebody else.”

Despite the fact he hated it, Harry tried to act following the man’s perceived persona. “And you let me enter nonetheless?” he scowled. “Without even asking for anyone to cover you? Had I been a... an enemy, you wouldn’t have stood a chance!”

The woman paled, and took a few steps back. “But... sir... why didn’t you enter through the Apparation point?”

‘Because I’m too young to Apparate.’ Harry wanted to say, just to see her face. However, his mission was more important than fun or curiosity. “Because I wanted to test our defences. Visibly, they have to be strengthened here.”

“Please, sir... don’t fire me! Please.” the young woman, whose nametag told Harry she was working as secretary from some obscure service, was almost on her knees.

He snorted, not at the woman, but at his own attitude. However, she understood the wrong way and really went to her knees, crying already. Harry was ready to tell her to stand up, when he saw the benefit he could grasp from the situation.

“Well...” he said gruffly, “do you know all the services here?”

“Yes, sir.” she said through her tears.

“You aren’t fired, then. Stand up! And go wash your face, too. I don’t like tears. You have one minute.”

She stood and darted towards the closest toilets, while Harry was counting in his head. When he reached forty-five, she was already

back, make-up and tears gone. 'She actually looks pretty.' thought Harry, before focussing on the task at hand.

"I'll give you a test. You are going to find the Lost and Found Items, then the Creatures Department, then the Unspeakables, then the Minister's office. In that order. I'll follow you to make sure you go there through the shortest path."

She looked at him, not understanding the reason behind this. However, she quickly moved when he barked "Now! Or I'll make sure you go up that elevator, not to come down again."

When he followed her out of the atrium, the atrium doorway emitted a weird sound. She turned around and looked at it.

"It must have grown rusty." growled Harry, kicking himself mentally. Of course, the ministry would have ways to detect animagi so as to prevent unwanted entry. But Harry wasn't exactly an animagus. Still, the device must have detected something. He passed under it again and back, but it stayed silent this time, its magic accustomed to Harry's strange signature.

After following her for some time, Harry found himself in the Lost and Found Items service, and, while looking around, he discreetly extracted the snake-like pendant Sly had given him and put it in his hand. The snake stayed coiled, so the souls vessel wasn't there. Harry repeated the process in the Creatures Department and in the door-less Unspeakable lobby. It could be anywhere, but Harry had selected the four places he thought had the highest probability of hosting the device. That left one.

When they arrived to the door of the antechamber of the Ministry, Harry turned to his involuntary guide. Motioning a room three doors down, he said "Wait for me in the coffee room."

He then entered. The secretary, another young woman, looked up from the magazine she had been reading and stowed it away, blushing.

“I’ll introduce you.” she said, before opening the enlarged end of a tube leading from her desk to the wall of the Minister’s own office, and through it. Visibly, thought Harry, they weren’t on par with muggle technology. While she spoke through it, he looked at his hand and almost jumped. The serpent was uncoiled, his head toward the Minister’s office door.

“Captain Singleton is here, Minister.”

The voice of Arthur Weasley echoed in the tube. “Enter.”

And Harry entered the room.

“Ah. Bob.” said the Minister, although it wasn’t as gentle as Arthur Weasley’s usual voice. “Captain of my soon-to-be-formed Special Supervising police. How was the old wand maker?”

Harry looked at the two men there, and imagined a probable answer.

“Easy, but he said nothing.”

The man behind Arthur looked at him questioningly and put his hand in his pocket. Harry had to act quickly, as he knew his disguise wasn’t enough to fool the two men for a long time.

“I found something in his shop, but it’s quite... dangerous.” he said, looking intently at the still-open connecting tube on the Minister’s desk.

Arthur closed that end and the man behind him threw a silencing spell on the door. “Satisfied?” he asked.

“Very.” said Harry, doing the wrist move which sent his metallic wand to his hand. The two men looked at the wand, surprised at its shiny aspect, and that gave Harry the necessary time to cast a Stunner toward them. Like last time, it covered a wide area, and the two men slumped on the floor at the same time. Harry removed their wands and looked at his snake pendant again. It was showing a bookcase. Not knowing about it, Harry only repeated the spell

Hermione had shown him, such a long time ago. A spell to open doors.

“Alohomora.”

The bookcase opened to reveal a small room, where several things rested. Several swords, shields, books, a set of armour, a grandfather's clock. And, in the middle, not even needing a pedestal, the vessel of souls. Harry looked inside and felt nauseous when he understood that the squirming grey substance was made of thousands of souls. Dozens of thousands of them.

He shook himself awake, and proceeded to store the device in his trunk before stowing it in his pocket afterwards. He then brought the two men inside and disrobed Arthur before tying them together. He knew that, if the two men were to be missing, he had to leave using his body. He removed his own clothes and, after morphing into the Minister, put Arthur's clothes on. Curious about the other man's identity, he fetched for the man's wallet, and learnt that the man was an Unspeakable named Broderick Bode. Harry suspected that, if the man had been seconding the Minister like that, he was perhaps like Arthur Weasley. A possessed body.

He closed the bookcase door and put one of the office chairs in the way. It was as innocuous as possible, but the door wouldn't open from the inside. Harry began to feel qualms at imprisoning people, but he convinced himself that he would release them later. After all, he had promised the goblins that he would take care of the problem. And he would need Arthur to publicly negate all the laws he had passed since... since he hadn't been himself. He would also need to put protection around each of the most important office's heads, so that they couldn't be impersonated by others.

Getting out, he greeted the secretary. “My guests have left already, and I am out for today. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Minister.” she said, standing. And she saluted.

Her right arm extended in front of her, the hand flat.

Harry almost retched on the spot. He had had inklings about the persona in Arthur's head, but it was getting clearer. And he didn't like it one bit. He had to act quickly.

He turned abruptly and exited the room, leaving behind a bewildered secretary, asking herself if she could release her salute as her boss hadn't answered to it as usual.

In a foul mood, Harry entered the coffee room three doors down, and the four employees there saluted him immediately.

"What are you doing?" he barked. Their salutes faltered as they didn't understand the question. "Get back to work!" he said, dismissing them all. The entrance secretary started to leave, and he remembered the reason why she was there initially.

"You! Captain Singleton said you knew the building quite well." she beamed at the praise. "Show me where you work." he asked. It was the most innocuous way to asking her to navigate him in the building again. After a quick tour of her cramped office and a swift note to her superior to increase her pay, he left, and headed to the atrium again, when he got called back.

"Minister! Minister!" it was his secretary.

"I thought I said I was leaving?" he asked, quite coldly.

She cringed, but continued anyway. "It's... I just received this, sir. I thought..."

Harry snatched the envelope she had been handing, and she recoiled. "Thank you." he said. "You can go back."

"But, sir, there's... the... owl... it's still there, sir. I think it awaits your answer."

"It will wait." said Harry, and she scurried back while he went for the elevator.

When he noticed the name on it, though, his mind reeled. The envelope had only three words on it:

To: Minister

Voldemort

Inside the mounting cabin, Harry morphed his face to an indistinct wizened old man, not able to shape-shift into his usual teenage body because of the clothes' length. He could try to transfigure them, but he wasn't use to it and didn't want to look sloppy right now. He then exited the phone booth and sat on a public bench nearby to open the message.

Dear Minister, the letter began.

It has come to my understanding that you asked for a meeting between us. You will acknowledge that I can't very well accept without speaking together beforehand. I suggest you firecall the "Gamer's Den" this evening at eight so that we might meet an agreement on our respective views. However, due to the quality of the laws you passed recently, as well as their quick enforcement, I don't think we'd need a long time.

Answer your acceptance of this appointment with the provided messenger. Use the bird also if you wish to reschedule it. Don't try to track it, and don't trap your answer. Don't try to trap the Gamer's Den either or to trace the call once started.

I think we'll come to an agreement soon.

Lord Voldemort

"Not bloody likely." muttered Harry, before tearing the old-looking parchment in small bits, dropping them in separate trashcans on his way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Once inside, Harry sat on a remote table, asking Tom for a butterbeer. He didn't have to wait for a long time to see Sly emerging from the corridor leading to the inn's rooms. Harry looked as the man glanced

around and sat on another table, not far away from his. Two minutes passed, before Harry decided to meet the man.

“I’m sorry, gentleman.” he said. “I couldn’t prevent noticing your loneliness. Care for someone to talk to?”

The other man barely looked at him, but Harry’s next words sank in.

“Or perhaps, you’d like a soul-awakening trip in the vessel I’ve anchored nearby?”

Sly looked up sharply, and met Harry’s glinting eyes. He nodded and, without a word, left toward Diagon Alley and its Apparation point, followed by Harry, still under the disguise of an old man. Once there, he handed Harry a sheet of parchment, and they both were whisked away, just as three cracks were heard, coming from people Apparating in.

Harry found himself in a secluded cave, and immediately reverted to his usual self. He had been quite happy of his disguise’s innocuousness, but was now finding it useless and quite cumbersome. Especially as he wasn’t steady on his legs due to the shift in perspective.

“If you have just a second, I’d like my clothes transfigured a bit?” said Harry.

Sly sighed, waved his wand expertly, and Harry’s clothes were entirely remodelled. It was now a dark green, with silver linings and a silver snake coiled on the left side of his chest.

“Cool.” said Harry.

Sly’s eyebrows shot up. Decidedly, the boy wasn’t completely Gryffindor to not instinctually react to his colours and animal of choice.

“Where is it?” asked Sly.

Harry took the trunk from his pocket, and enlarged it. He opened it, and saw Sly's eyes go wide in front of the item. When the man spoke, it was in an altered tone.

"My preciousss..."

It was... Sly decidedly looked greedy as he surveyed the squirming mass of souls, and it disturbed Harry greatly. After several seconds, he spoke.

"Your part, now."

Sly didn't move.

"Sly? Sir?" To Sly's slight nod, Harry spoke louder. "I'd like you fill your end of the bargain, now."

The man looked up, visibly torn between the bargain and the act of keeping everything for himself. However, he had always been honourable, and he reluctantly straightened up.

"You want me to free all 'good' souls and give some of them to you. And you want to watch." Sly stated.

Harry nodded.

"Well... can you sit here and wait for a few decades?" asked Sly, smirking.

"What?"

"You heard me. How did you think I was going to do it? There's only one way to do that: extract each of them, one at a time, and check if it's 'good' or not. And that takes the hell of a time."

"But..." started Harry.

“However,” continued Sly as if Harry hadn’t interrupted him, “I can call for a given soul and extract it in mere seconds. Are you still interested?”

Harry nodded. Sly then went through his pockets, extracting three items. The first was a small booklet. The second was a small item, looking like a drum with a lock on its side. And the third was his wand.

“Alright,” he began, and Harry straightened up. “The booklet gives you the procedures, incantations, and wand movements, to interact with the souls. This,” he said, pointing to the small drum, “is a pensieve. It’s a portable model, smaller than most other models, and it’s equipped with a lock. I give it to you in exchange for your service to me. Put your hand on it.”

Harry complied, and the man put his own hand on top of Harry’s, mumbling several words. The drum-like item shone with grey light and Sly smiled. “It’s yours, now. Only you can open it. The incantation I just said, as well as the pensieve’s other properties are in the booklet.”

“But...” started Harry again.

“You wonder why I’d offer you a pensieve?” asked Sly.

Harry nodded, and the man chuckled.

“Did you really think you would transport souls in your hands or in your pockets?”

Harry hadn’t thought about the question, and shamefully shook his head.

“Don’t worry. This pensieve can hold a dozen souls. Which ones?” asked Sly in a business-like voice.

“Ginny... you need the full name?”

“If you cast the spell, the mere intention, or the forename of somebody you knew, that’s all you need. If I do the casting, I need the full name, as I don’t know your targets as well as you do. The incantation is *Pescare Anima Ginny*, for instance, and the wand movement is like this.” the man said, doing with his wand a gesture that any fisherman would recognize straight away.

“When you have the soul at the end of your wand, you can talk to it by saying *Parlare Anima* and moving your wand in a full circle. Note that speaking with souls is like a dream: it takes place at an accelerated rate. You can chat for a full hour, and only minutes would have passed outside.”

Harry nodded, knowing the concept of different time frames thanks to his hideaway.

Sly wasn’t finished, though. “Also note that you can include others in the discussion: they just have to be in contact with your wand hand as you cast the spell. There are other spells also: you can transform the soul into a ghost with *Pamortis Anima*, and ‘release’ it with *Liberare Anima*. When you release a soul, it disappears from this world, and is sent to the... to the gods.”

To Harry wondering look, the man shrugged. “All is explained in the booklet. The last thing it how to deposit a soul from a wand into a pensieve: you just tap it inside. Beware: these are souls, not memories. If you bring one to someone’s temple, even yours, it possesses that person, whose soul exits through the other temple.”

After several seconds, during which Harry digested everything, the man sat back and motioned Harry next to him. “Ready?”

Harry swallowed nervously. “As much as someone ready to meet his deceased love.”

He took his wand out, not thinking clearly and, not noticing Sly’s suddenly alarmed expression, jerked his wand in the appropriate motion, speaking the words. “*Pescare Anima Ginny*.”

Only then did he understand what he had just done. He had just fetched Ginny's soul with the most powerful wand ever known to Ollivander – and the old wand maker was knowledgeable – and, judging by Sly's round eyes, the man didn't know what to think. Especially as the soul which shot from the pensieve to attach itself to his wand tip, instead of staying its ashen colour, switched to a bright white upon touching the wand.

Harry looked at it, wondering. Was it Ginny? Was she alright?

"Is this normal?" he asked Sly. Not hearing anything from the still-shocked man, he spoke again "What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

Harry didn't know, either. But there was one quick way to discover if this was actually Ginny, and how she was faring.

"Parlare Anima." said Harry.

He found himself in a white countryside, with translucent trees and a house in a distance. A house which reminded him very much of a large family of redheads. The Burrow.

"Ginny!" he yelled, hope suddenly filling his heart. "Ginny?"

"Harry?" came a soft voice behind him. "Is that you?"

He whirled around, and saw her. She was sitting near a stream, and looked straight at him. He looked down at himself and noticed that he wasn't white or translucent like everything here. He was actually his normal self, colours included.

"It's me, Ginny. Are you... are you alright?"

"You know," she sighed. "I'm quite alright, now. When I died... when I felt the curse hit me, I felt a tearing inside me, and something like... like when you are portkeyed away." she said, while he sat next to her. "Then, I was in darkness. I knew there were people around me, all

around me, and they were yelling and kicking, but I couldn't make out the words, and their kicks didn't harm me. But it was frightful. I stayed there a long time, Harry, and it really felt like hell." she said, her eyes welling up with tears, and he hugged her. "But I just felt hooked and found this wonderful place. I guess it must be heaven." she finished.

Standing, she stretched, before turning to look at Harry in the eye. "And you, how did you die, Harry?"

It took Harry a full hour to explain to her about his actions following her kidnapping, and the resulting conclusion that she wasn't exactly dead, and that he wasn't dead at all. After promising not to let her in the dark again and to return her to the living as soon as possible, he emerged from the trance, and found a smirking Sly looking at him. Harry smiled back, and tapped his wand inside the pensieve, freeing Ginny's soul, who slowly recovered its ashen tinge.

"What was it?" asked Sly, whose face had found its usual seriousness back.

"Well... first of all, thank you. That was the most... intense moment I had to pass. This," Harry said, moving his wand around, "is my wand."

"Of course. What's the wood and core?"

It was Harry's turn to smirk. "You'll never guess."

"Well... I was good at riddles in my time, but I think you are more pressed by the time than I am."

"Alright, alright. The wood is teak and the core is a mix of a very old basilisk and my blood. It's-"

"Very old basilisk? And your blood? How comes they are even compatible? And how did you..."

“Well, last year, I had to fight a basilisk which was almost a thousand years old. Some people said that it was left there by Salazar Slytherin as a revenge tool when he fled from the castle.”

The man, hearing all this, got red in the face and tried to say something, but only strangled cries came from his deformed mouth.

“Sir?” asked Harry. “Are you alright?”

After several minutes, the man recovered his countenance enough to motion Harry to continue his explanation.

“After I made my first wand, I-”

“Wait a minute! You made this wand?”

“Why... yes. Why are you acting strangely all of a sudden?”

Sly considered the question, and his impossibility to fully answer it. Shrugging, he said “No matter. I just found it unusual that somebody would make his own wand. Especially someone as young as you are.”

“Well, if it calms you, I didn’t steal anything. I fetched the parts myself, from the basilisk body which was still in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Sly paled, now. In the time span of a few minutes, he had gone into more facial expression than his whole life. “You... you are a Parseltongue!” he said.

Harry sighed. “Well... my schoolmates already went into the ‘dark wizard’ thing, but I thought you were more adult than them.”

“It’s not that! How can you be a Parseltongue, after... after...” Sly couldn’t tell him that Gryffindor had made experiments with Blood Magic and had cursed them both, preventing a common heir.

Harry shrugged, and his explanation surprised the man all the same. "Dumbledore said that Voldemort might have given the 'gift' to me when his killing curse rebounded on him."

If Sly hadn't informed himself of the current state of the magical world, he would have suffered another round of surprised expressions at Harry saying he made a supposedly unblockable killing curse rebound toward the powerful evil man who had cast it. As it was, he only looked at the teen with round eyes. Harry hadn't noticed the man's surprise, though, and was finishing his explanation about his wand.

"...and it's covered in platinum to hold the wood together, and the end is a diamond shaped into a lens."

Sly went silent for a time, digesting the information, and Harry, wanting to test something, used his other wand to extract Arthur and Broderick's souls. His insight was true, as his regular wand only yielded an ashen-coloured drab landscape. After briefly discussing with the two men, acquiescing to their request of returning to their body quickly, he immediately got another idea, and asked Sly about something related to it.

"Do you know of someone really evil in there?"

"Well. Yes. Quite a few, even. Why?"

"I had an idea I want to test. Can you give me a name?"

Sly thought about it for a second before answering. "Demetricus Aureus Longinus. He's a slob of a wizard who liked to stuff his face while watching others being tortured, especially young virgins. He was condemned to suffer the Kiss in 1130 if I recall correctly."

"Geesh. Thanks for the details." Said Harry sarcastically, before turning to the barrel of souls and lifting his powerful wand. "Pescare Anima Demetricus Aureus Longinus."

Like Ginny before, the soul changed colour upon reaching the wand tip. However, unlike Ginny, the new colour wasn't white at all. It was pitch black.

"Do you really want to see what's inside?" asked Sly.

Harry shook himself, before answering. "No. Not really. It's either his heaven or his hell, and both might include the torture you mentioned." he tapped the black blob inside the barrel, releasing it back to where it came, and smiled.

"I guess I have the perfect tool to help you sort them, when I'll have finished with all the 'current affairs'." said Harry.

Sly wasn't happy of being reminded about his duties, but he agreed nonetheless. As soon as the sorting would be done, he would be free to roam the planet.

Harry, having discussed with the Weasleys about him during the Romanian vacation, knew about Bill's death, and extracted his soul next. The brief chat he had with him was disturbing, as the man, visibly perturbed by the time he spent under Voldemort's control, only asked for forgiveness for his deeds. Harry didn't know where his body was, though, and thus couldn't promise to bring him back to life. Harry quickly followed by fetching Hermione. He had a quick chat with her too, thanking her for her sacrifice and promising her return to her body. She had numerous questions, of course, and he answered most of them truthfully, before returning to the real world, dropping her next to the others in his pensieve. He then turned back to the barrel again, his breathing uneven. There were others he wanted to meet. Two others.

"Pescare Anima my parents." he hadn't thought about it, and 'my parents' came naturally. To his surprise, and to Sly's shock, it worked, and two distinct blobs shot from the squirming mass to attach to his wand tip.

He then started to discuss with them, inside the translucent white reconstruction of their house at Godric's Hollow. To his surprise, even

if they had spent the last thirteen years inside a dark barrel of squirming souls, Lily's connection to him had made it so that she was able to see a bit of what happened to him, in turn transmitting to James through their marriage link. Lily started by crying, asking for forgiveness for the Dursleys' treatment. At the same time, James growled about the fact that Harry hadn't been deemed to go there at all. They explained that their will had been to send Harry to his godfather, and didn't understand why the man had been sent to prison without a trial. Harry spent an hour of outside time speaking with them, which stretched into a dozen hours of catching up inside. They had much to discuss.

When he emerged, he was exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Sly was quite concerned about him, and transfigured several rocks into a comfortable bed while Harry put his parents' souls in the pensieve with the others. Remembering his promise to Ginny, he cast a Lumos spell on the pensieve lid's inside before locking it.

He then stretched, lied down, and fell asleep mere seconds after hitting the pillow.

At the same time, in Voldemort's cottage...

"That traitor! Offering help and then striking me in the back! And the wretched Minister who doesn't answer!" Voldemort was fuming, pacing in the safety of his throne room, in front of a small number of followers. "I have to do something about it, but what? That supposed ally had been self-sufficient and strangely resilient to threats. As if he didn't need anything on earth. Well, except for one thing. What was it already?" he stopped pacing, trying to remember. "Ah yes, a large pensieve."

The snake-faced man looked at his detachment of Death Eaters. "You!" he barked to the twelve cringing followers. "You are going to contact all our spies in the Ministry, before going there. Your target is a pensieve, larger than usual. Interrogate everyone. Kill if you have to. I want the thing. And if you find the traitor on the way..." he paused for effect. "Drop the pensieve search, and bring me the man. Maimed, disfigured, tortured, I don't care. But alive and conscious."

Back in Sly's cave...

Just as Sly was going back from looking at the sleeping teenager in wonder, he jumped in fright at the two persons watching him. Two persons who had appeared there without the customary pop or crack coming from wizards Apparating. Two persons Sly had seen already, a very long time ago. Although it hadn't been at the same time. Seeing both of them at the same place at the same time was a sign.

"You discussed about me." he stated dejectedly, knowing it was true.

They both nodded, and Sly sighed. Of course. How could he think of walking free with his past following him?

"It seems that we reached a sort of..." started the one in black.

"...agreement." finished the old one in white.

Sly rolled his eyes. A long time ago, he had found out about those two, and at that time already, they had numerous disagreements, which he had used to his advantage to build the device which now rested between him and the two of them. The fact that they had reached an agreement about him was rewarding in itself, but rather... foreboding.

"Thine time here is up." said the older-looking one, confirming Sly's thoughts. "Have the grace to accept thine fate."

"Besides, as you swore to the youngling here that you were going to sort these," said the younger, pointing to the squirming mass of souls, "you might as well do it efficiently."

"And, instead of walking slowly around this ball of dirt, thou couldst visit our domains."

"After you finish sorting the souls."

"Of course."

Both of them stopped talking and looked at Sly in askance.

“What?” he asked.

“Was he dull like that a thousand years ago?” asked Thirteen to the other.

“It does not seem to me. He was quite sharp. Time doth have a strange effect on the mind of mortals.”

“What do you want, exactly?” asked Sly.

“We propose you to be the one directing the souls upon their arrival.” said the black-clad one.

“After their death. And only after thou dost that to your loot.” specified the other one, pointing at the device again.

“If you refuse,” said Thirteen smugly, “I’ll have you know that a spot is free in my pits of eternal suffering. In fact, it had been reserved for you since your little... theft.”

Sly sighed. There was no way out of it. “Alright. You win. I’ll do it.”

Both ‘gods’ smiled. Everything was going back into proper order soon, and the Superintendant wouldn’t be disturbed.

“Although,” started Sly, “what about him?” he asked, pointing at the prone form of Harry.

“Thou didst not share the information on the soul structure with him, didst thee?” asked the Creator.

On Sly’s negative shake of the head, he continued. “Besides, even if thou hast, he is part of the game and cannot be removed until it finishes.”

“What game?”

Thirteen nudged Sly's shoulder. "The game of power you disengaged yourself from. You'll see it soon."

The two eternal beings took hold of one of Sly's shoulders each, while the man was holding his precious barrel to his chest. "We hereby acknowledge you as central judge for the souls of the dead. May you accomplish this task fully and faithfully." they both said, before disappearing from the cave. With Sly and his souls. The only thing which stayed after them was an envelope, dropped from the Creator's fingers.

The surroundings changed, and Sly found himself in a beautiful room, with a desk and four large doors, all closed.

"The door in front of the desk is for the arrivals." explained Thirteen. "On your left, it's my domain, and on your right, it's his." he pointed to the Creator. "Behind you are your private chambers."

"Thou wilt start with removing all the 'good' souls from the barrel thou hast got there." said the other. "Remember our division. The creative ones go to me, and the regular folk go to him." he finished, while Thirteen was huffing in contempt. "Thou hast understood everything?"

"Yes. I think so." answered the newly-instated guardian of the Heavens.

"In this case, we leave you to your work. If you do well, we'll also appoint you for judging the final destination as well." said Thirteen. In front of Sly's interrogative stance, he explained. "In my case, hell pits or heavenly gardens."

Sly nodded in understanding and they went to their doors, before turning back to him. At the same moment, they spoke their final words before leaving the room.

"Welcome to your new home, Salazar Slytherin."  
A few hours afterwards...

Harry woke up with a start, and found himself in a black place. Grasping his wand, he quickly cast a Light spell, only to have to blink repeatedly in front of the miniature sun which had appeared in front of him. 'I'll have to be careful with that wand.' he thought.

After being able to see again, he noticed several things, the foremost one being that Sly was gone with the souls' barrel. His initial reaction was anger at the man's departure, but he found an envelope on the ground where the man had been, and stood. Once he was upright, though, the bed returned to its original state. Harry picked the miniature pensieve and stored it in his pocket, before fetching the letter.

Harry, it began in a sophisticated writing.

Thou shouldst not try to find Mr Sly, as we offered him the best position one could imagine, and he will not be reachable again. He will, of course, begin by doing what he promised to you: sorting his looted souls. The very paper thou are holding hath been charmed as a portkey, which will activate upon thou uttering the word "Mission" and which will bring thee directly to the Ministry Apparation point. I know thou art needed there. This message will not accompany thee there.

Good luck in taking care of Voldemort.

The message wasn't signed, but Harry could feel the magic behind the portkey spell, and whoever it was, he or she was powerful. Anyone powerful and helpful in his war against Voldemort was an asset. He morphed himself back into Arthur Weasley's form, and was a bit surprised that Sly's transfiguration spell on his clothes reverted at the same time, returning his clothes into the Minister's. He shrugged and, with a last look around to check if he forgot anything, he spoke the activation word.

Several days later, a young and muggle Peruvian shepherd would find the grotto with the light inside and he would raise quite the spiritual commotion before several wizard came to dispel the light. It would need seven of them to cast the dispelling charm at the same

time for it to work, and the cave would still be visited by religious pilgrims afterwards.

At the Ministry...

When he had been there the first time, Harry had memorized the location of the Minister's office, and he headed straight for it as soon as he appeared in the almost-deserted building. It was night time, and few workers were still there, mainly maintenance and security people. He barged in 'his' office, only to find several things amiss.

Firstly, the place was in shambles, the desk overturned and papers everywhere.

Secondly, there were people there. Around eight black-robed wizards or witches with white masks. Death Eaters.

Thirdly, the bookcase was open, and four other Death Eaters were 'interrogating' the Minister and the Unspeakable they had found already tied there, and had untied for a better use of the Cruciatus.

Harry was surprised, but not as much as the people there, because they hadn't been ready to see another Minister, fully clothed, enter the office at this point in time. Recovering, everyone whisked his or her wand and several spells were shot at the same time. Harry only used a regular Stunner, but was the target of two Crucio, two Expelliarmus, two Reducto, and two Imperio. The mind-control curses didn't work at all thanks to his improved mind defences. He also had the surprise of not releasing his wand even though the disarming spells hit home. His last thought before being hit with the two Cruciatuses and one Explosion – the other being badly aimed – was that his blood certainly allowed his wand to stay with him.

He felt hell again, barely being able to switch to his Elemental powers to keep the pain in check. He didn't have to concentrate on the Cruciatus for a long time, though, as it stopped right after it started. However, the Explosion curse had struck his left arm, and it was dangling on his side, unusable. Despite the pain which still shot through it, Harry opened his eyes and was greeted by four surprised gazes. Only four. The eight wizards in the office proper were on the

ground, stunned. Visibly, his cone-shaped area of effect was... effective.

Realizing the danger, one of the four remaining Death Eaters grasped the man he was interrogating and, thrusting something in his hand, spoke a particular word, thus disappearing from view with the man. The other three Death Eaters began to act in the same way, when Harry sent the improved Stunner their way, and they fell on the floor.

Stepping over the unconscious bodies, Harry rushed to check about the remaining prisoner. The man had visibly been tortured for information, as he was shivering. However, Harry smiled at his luck. The body in front of him was Arthur Weasley's. Stunning him, he then concentrated on his Elemental vision and powers to block the pain messages from the abused man's nerves. He then extracted his miniature pensieve from his pocket, and fetched Arthur's soul from it. Praying for it to work, he approached the ashen blob to the body's temple, and it was quickly absorbed. Mere seconds afterwards, another one was leaking through the other side of the man's head, and fell on the floor. Harry quickly recovered it with his wand, and understood that everything had worked according to Sly's predictions. When he had fetched Arthur's soul, it had been coloured in white, and that one was black. So black that it appeared to dim the light around them.

Harry didn't want to see whether the man's soul was happy burning people or if it was burning himself, neither did he want to see the infamous man at all. He also didn't want that particular soul near the ones he loved. There was only one alternative left. Knowing that the man was already dead, he had no qualm in speaking the words to release his soul from the world. The gods who were governing the souls would surely find the appropriate punishment for Adolf Hitler. Barely a minute afterwards...

Amelia Bones had been sleeping soundly when Susan came waking her. Amelia had welcomed her niece in her London flat the day before so that Susan would be able to explore the city a bit for a few days.

"Wake up, aunty! Wake up! There's a firecall for you!" said Susan.

“Tell them to leave me alone! It’s not the time for society calls.” she grumbled and turned over. Why did this always happen when she had wonderful dreams? Dreams of not answering to the enraged Minister anymore...

“I can’t! It’s the Minister!”

“What?” asked Susan, almost falling from the bed in the scramble which ensued.

“The Minister, aunty.”

Now completely awake, Amelia sent Susan back to her bed, in the spare bedroom closest to the den and its fireplace, and she put on a robe before going to meet her employer.

“Amelia, I...”

“Minister. If you really want me to resign, it’s the best way to do it.” she said tersely. In the previous days, the man had worn her down, overriding her every decisions concerning the management of the Law Enforcement Department. She hadn’t wanted to step down, intent on keeping track of Auror abuses. However, if the Minister was taking things personally, she would step down, and head for the Prophet immediately afterwards.

“I don’t want you to resign, Amelia.” said Arthur after a time. The voice was different than before, and Amelia Bones was quite surprised at it. Was it... shame?

“What do you want, then?”

“I want to tell you the truth about me, and about why there are eleven unconscious Death Eaters in my office at that very moment.”

“WHAT?”

“I think you understood. Do you agree to meet me there? I’ll keep the Floo connection open.”

Amelia thought about it. Eleven Death Eaters? The truth about the Minister? It could take her whatever remained of the night and certainly a good part of the day. Susan was awake already, so she could bring her along.

“Alright, Minister. But I suspect the case will take time, and my niece is here. I don’t want to leave her alone, can she...?”

Arthur turned his head in the fire and seemed to chat with somebody, before turning back with a smile. An amused smile like the ones Amelia hadn’t witnessed on his face for a long time.

“Of course she can come. She’ll be surprised, though. And, Amelia?”

“What?”

“Call me Arthur, please.”

“Agreed, but you have to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Some coffee for when we’ll arrive.”

He laughed and agreed, before removing his head from the fire.

This sealed the renewed friendship between the two of them, and it only took five minutes for Amelia and Susan to get some clothes on before jumping in the fire.

Amelia looked around. The Minister’s office was in shambles, even if Arthur and Harry had put the Minister’s sturdy desk back upright. Eight bodies were lying around. She noticed that one of the bookcases was missing, completely destroyed, and saw the secret

room and the three other bodies. Looking at Arthur's strained face, she smirked.

"Difficult night?"

He looked up, and she noticed he had been crying. "You have no idea."

She looked around. "Don't they need to be tied up? I mean... they look stunned, but they could come out of it at any moment."

"I doubt it." said a new voice.

The Minister didn't look, but Amelia and Susan turned around and noticed a young man in the entrance, holding a platter with four steaming cups. Unbeknownst to everyone, Harry had used his shape-shifting abilities to heal himself, modelling his bones so that they held true again. It would take them some time to heal completely, but it was better than having them disappear and painfully re-grown afterwards.

When nobody reacted, he smiled and put the platter on the desk. "Coffee, everyone?"

Susan reacted first. "But... you are... dead?"

"Do I look like it?" asked Harry. "I can assure you I'm not dead."

"Who are you?" asked Amelia.

"I'm sorry; my education didn't provide me with good manners. Nice to meet you, Madam Bones. I'm Harry Potter."

She gasped, and Susan fainted.

After calling for Aurors to move the Death Eaters into custody, Amelia sat to hear Harry and Arthur's recollection of the night's events. Afterwards, they explained about the pensieve-like item and the soul exchange. It took quite some time, and the sun was shining at the window when they finished that topic. Susan, who had been tired

already, hadn't woken from her fainting and was sleeping on the couch nearby.

"So, to sum up," said Amelia, "you have no memory of what happened since you were thrown out of your mind."

"That's it," answered Arthur. "Harry told me some of the things "I" supposedly did, and I'm disgusted about it. No doubt other people are, as well. I need to step down."

"Not now!" said Amelia animatedly.

Arthur looked at her for a few seconds. "Why? I mean... people won't want to work with me anymore, and I just want to go home, and... wait a minute! Harry, what happened to my family? Did he..." he trailed, unable to formulate his darkest thoughts.

Harry looked at him and smiled, before speaking. "Everyone is relatively fine. They are in Hogwarts, now."

"Why Hogwarts?"

"I don't know all the details." Harry said, looking at his feet. He knew many details, in fact, but didn't want Arthur to lose the little grasp he still had on his position by visiting angry family members. Because they would surely be angry.

Arthur stood up and went to the fireplace.

"What are you doing?" asked Amelia, going after him.

"Going to Hogwarts." he muttered, taking a pinch of Floo powder.

She grasped his hand, making the fine powder fall to the ground. "No you are not! The first thing that you are going to do now is bring up a large meeting with all the Department Heads, and we are going to explain a bit and then overturn each and every law your horrible "substitute" passed in your place."

Arthur sighed. That would take a long time. But he understood that if he stepped down with the current state of the law, it would be hell to find an honest replacement.

“Let’s do that, then. I think they must be awake by now.”

Harry nodded along, before noticing that the sun was actually high enough for Gringotts to be open.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, “I have certain... errands... I need to be taken care of.” said Harry, looking at Arthur. “Mr Weasley, you are going to Hogwarts today?”

“Yes.” he answered, but a glance to his office remembered him of the similarity between its scrambled state and the current law. “If I can make it.”

“Do you have an empty portable pensieve?”

Arthur frowned. “Yes, I mean... it’s one of my work tools, so, yes. And I’m sure it’s empty, because of security reasons. Why?”

“Can I ask you two to keep a secret?” Harry said, not comprising the unconscious form of Susan soundly sleeping behind him.

“Of course, Harry. What is it?”

Harry took his pensieve from his pocket and put it on the desk. Wrongly understanding that Harry wanted to give him some of his memories, Arthur took his own pensieve from one of his drawers and put it beside Harry’s. They both opened it at the same time, and everyone save Harry, who had closed his eyes beforehand, was blinded by the light coming from his pensieve. While everyone recovered their eyesight, Harry fetched Hermione’s soul and had a very quick chat with her, informing her of the proceedings.

“It doesn’t look like a memory.” said Amelia when she noticed the white blob at the end of the teen’s wand. “What is this, Harry?” she asked.

“Madam Bones, Mr Weasley, this is Hermione.”

They both looked at the soul, not understanding. Arthur was the first to react. “What do you mean? Has she been possessed like me?”

“No. This is the secret I want you to keep.” he took a ragged breath, reminiscing the scene. “We were in a battle with Death Eaters. She jumped in front of me and took the brunt of a particular curse. The Avada Kedavra.”

“WHAT?” they both asked at the same time.

“I discovered, thanks to a friend, that that particular curse doesn’t kill. In fact, it painfully removes one’s soul and stores it in a specially-designed device, which-”

“What device? And where is it? Do you understand the implications of what you are saying?” the two adults asked.

Harry put Hermione’s soul in the Minister’s pensieve, before lifting his hands, and they eventually calmed. “The man who shown me the device disappeared after allowing me to take some of the souls from it. Hermione was one of them. Because she died yesterday, her body will be able to absorb her soul back. All you have to do is take the soul with your wand and put it to her temple, as you would do with a memory. Don’t do this to anyone else!”

“Alright, I understand.” said Arthur, who, after a moment of thoughts, asked “You said souls, plural... Whose?”

Harry thought about the man’s question. He wasn’t ready to tell him about Ginny, but he could tell him a part of truth. “My parents.” he said, looking at his feet.

“But... they can’t be resurrected!” blurted Amelia. “I mean, you don’t have their body.”

“I was able... to have a chat with them.” Harry said, his eyes welling up at the sweet memories.

But Amelia wasn’t finished. “And that also means... it goes back a long time? Harry, you didn’t take any other soul? How many souls were-”

Harry once again raised his hand, interrupting the woman’s questions. “I didn’t know who to choose, Madam Bones. There were dozens of thousands of souls in it, not all of them victims of the Unforgivable.”

She was stunned by the sheer number, but Arthur had recovered. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Harry sighed. If he didn’t stop speaking, he would spill everything. “Inside were also the victims of the Dementors’ Kiss.”

The three of them went silent for a minute, until Susan started to wake up.

Harry then said goodbye to everyone and, after reminding Arthur of his mission concerning Hermione, he used the fireplace to head for the Leaky Cauldron.

The meeting that ensued was hell for Arthur, but it was also heartening for everyone. After he explained about his possession for a short time, they agreed about overturning all the laws passed since he came back from vacations. They also freed the prisoners who had unjustly been imprisoned during that time, and agreed to enforce the security measures around each of their positions to prevent future cases of possession. And then, to their surprise, Arthur told them he wanted to step down.

The man was overcome with guilt, and he wanted to spend as much time as possible around his family. While they understood him, he was still good at this job and they didn’t want to shake the wizarding

world more than it already was. After an hour of discussion, Arthur relented, and accepted to stay for the duration of his mandate. However, they all decided that the man needed a vacation with his family to explain about his case, and that it would also be interesting to get the story to the press.

They needed another couple of hours to recall each and every law and decree that the Minister had passed in the last few weeks, writing down a list of suspect people that the man had promoted while possessed. Arthur hadn't known anything about his substitute, and was surprised of the massive amount of work they had to do to change the law back to its original state. The meeting ended around lunch time, and they called for all the registered newspapers to send several journalists for a press conference. After a brief meal, it took two hours for the tired Minister to tell an edited 'whole' story conveniently hiding Harry's role, and an additional hour to answer the uninterrupted flow of questions afterwards. A few reporters felt that several bits of information were missing, but didn't get anything else from the man.

After they all left, Arthur had barely five minutes to head back to his office before being almost assaulted with questions from Ministry employees. Some were delighted, some were ecstatic, and a few didn't seem that happy. Arthur made a mental note of these, and repeated what he had said to the journalists. Unbeknownst to him, hundreds of owls were already flying through the country to deliver special editions of each and every journal they had invited. With magic, many things were quicker than the muggle way, and publishing a newspaper was one of them.

It wasn't before the clock rang four in the afternoon that Arthur was finally left alone. He downed a dose of Peppering Up potion from his private stash – the Minister of Magic often worked late – and went to his fireplace, one of the most protected of Great Britain, and one of the rare ones directly linked to Hogwarts. Arthur intended to see his family as soon as possible and, now that his duties were fulfilled, he finally was able to. Just before leaving, though, he made sure that his important package was safely stowed in his pocket. Earlier that morning...

Going to Gringotts in the same early hour and spotting the same teller as yesterday, Harry got rid of two problems: attention and repetition. No customer was there, and the goblin recognized him immediately, and asked. "Did you do it?"

To answer, Harry merely raised his right thumb, and the goblin grinned, ready to tear the infamous sign right away.

"However," said Harry, stopping his move, "I don't think everybody knows about it yet. They are holding a meeting right now so that the unfair laws may be removed today."

"You are right, Mr Potter." said the goblin. "When they will be actually removed, the whole goblin society would have a debt of honour toward you. I'm not the highest-ranked teller of Gringotts' employees, but I can assure you that something like that deserves acknowledgement."

Harry blushed. Another spotlight? Not likely. "I don't need a ceremony, you know." he said. "I don't like being shown or moved around. Especially as it generally ends up in the press."

"The press?" the goblin seemed shocked. "I was speaking about goblin ceremonies. Only few humans had witnessed them, and fewer had been the recipient. And no human journalist has ever been invited. We have ways to detect sneakers, you know. How do you think we protect our banks?"

Harry nodded, before speaking again. "You said yesterday that you could take me to Malf... to my place?"

"Yes. You wish to go now?"

Harry nodded vigorously.

"Alright. Come with me, Mr Potter." said the goblin, putting a 'Closed' sign on his booth. The sign didn't disturb anyone, though, because there wasn't anyone else anyway.

Harry followed the teller through a maze of corridors, until they arrived to a door where a sign was written, although it wasn't in a language or writing Harry knew. He supposed it was Gobbledegook, the goblin's own language.

"This is our transportation platform, Mr Potter. As the Malfoy have protected their house with the Fidelius, we are forced to use it, otherwise, I'd have given you the address."

"You mean... this can bring people to places under Fidelius?"

"Yes. It's powered by goblin magic, and only the appointed goblin can use it. In case you were wondering, very few wizards know about it, and there has been no case of treason on the goblin's side for as long as we have existed."

Harry went silent while the goblin opened the door. Inside was a simple room with a circle on the ground, and a tall and thin goblin behind a desk. The teller went to the tall goblin and they discussed quickly in a language Harry didn't understand, but he suspected it was Gobbledegook too.

"Goo inn ssirkel." said the tall goblin with a horrible accent while the other handed him the scroll. While Harry obeyed and entered the circle on the ground, the tall goblin snatched the scroll from the other's hand and merely looked at it. He then signed it, and put his hand flat on it, looking at Harry intently. The teenager felt strange under the gaze, and tried to move, but found that he was forcefully held. He couldn't even look at the other goblin to say anything. However, just as he was starting to suffocate, everything disappeared around him, to be replaced by the magnificent façade of Malfoy Manor.

'You have to give them that,' thought Harry, 'they have taste in architecture. Now, where is that trapdoor?'

He suddenly remembered the goblin's words from yesterday: Their house is right next to the ruins of your grandmother's house...

‘At least, I won’t be breaking in.’ he thought, before chuckling. ‘It wouldn’t constitute breaking in anyways, because it’s my property, now.’

Looking around, he didn’t notice anything unusual but, knowing the Malfoy sense of decorum, they wouldn’t want rubble visible from the front of their home. He walked around the large building and, true to his thinking, found a large pile of construction rubble behind the manor’s back wall. And that wall didn’t have any window. Harry smirked. Not only the Malfoy didn’t want to see it from the front, they didn’t want to see it from the back either.

He quickly went to the pile of rubble and started moving bricks and rotten beams out of the way, but a thought interrupted his hard work. He was a wizard! And, more than that, he was a Magius! Not only was he able to levitate things out of the way, he was also able to discover the trapdoor easily.

Dropping the two bricks he was currently holding, he concentrated on his Elemental vision, and discovered a square with a bit of light, under several layers of bricks. He then got his wand out and with the appropriate Wingardium Leviosa – correctly enunciated – he moved the bricks out of the way. It helped that his powerful wand allowed him to move bricks by groups of a few dozens each time. Otherwise, he would be more tired mentally than if he had removed them manually. After everything was out of the way, he concentrated again and found the trapdoor under a hiding spell which made it in the same colour and texture than the surrounding carpet. He eagerly opened it, and a ladder appeared.

His heart beating furiously against his ribs, he went down the ladder into the bedroom, and slowly looked around. Everything was in its place. Ginny’s body was in the bed. The only strange thing was the metal arm protruding from the bed, holding a bottle of unknown substance, which was linked through several tubes to the girl’s body. Harry didn’t know what the near-empty bottle contained, but the setting was clear. The magical bed was doing everything in its power to keep the body alive.

He put the small pensieve on the desk, and extracted Ginny's soul from it. On wobbly legs, he slowly approached the body. He knew nothing about the delay of viability of a dead body, even with intravenous help. He decided to ask Ginny for the final decision, and uttered the appropriate spell.

"Hi again, Harry." she said.

"Hi Ginny." he answered tensely.

She frowned. "Why are you so nervous?"

"This is it, Gin. I found your body. Are you sure you want to do it?"

"Well," she answered, "there's no need to stay here, is there? It's beautiful, but it only happens when you want to talk to me. The rest of the time, I'm in a luminous place – thank you – but always with the squirming others I can't hear or see correctly."

"You'll see, then. I'll put you back in your head as soon as I leave."

"Harry?" she asked quietly as he stood up. She stood as well.

"Yes?"

"I love you."

He was amazed. Her usual chocolate were as white as the surrounding landscape, but he was still held by her passionate gaze. There was only one correct answer, and he agreed wholeheartedly.

"I love you too."

He returned to the outside world, and slowly approached the wand tip to her body, noticing on the way that she wasn't wounded anymore. She had been bloodied when he had tried to rescue her, but it seems the bed had healed her quite a bit. He blushed. In healing the wounds, the bed had also exposed a rather large expanse of skin which, without being off-limits, was more than everything he had seen of her.

It also appeased him to know, thanks to the bed, that the Death Eaters hadn't tried anything indecent toward her.

The soul was swiftly absorbed by the head, and the bed hummed in response, the strange-looking bottle and tubes returning to the potion store while other syringes gave her other substances to deal with. She started to move, weakly at first, then forcefully, although it wasn't coordinated. She was convulsing. Harry didn't know what to do, and decided to hold her, while repeating appeasing words to her ears. After several minutes of doing so, she started to glow and the shaking stopped. Mere seconds afterwards, she looked up.

"Harry..." she said, but her gaze wasn't focused on him. "Who is he?"

Harry looked over his shoulder, and noticed the man too. He looked old, but his eyes looked even older than that, as if the man had lived many millennia. Or more. Actually, it was more.

The Creator took a step forward and his move allowed Harry to notice the new item on his desk, beside his small pensieve.

Sly's device.

"Who are you?" asked Ginny.

"What have you done with Sly?" asked Harry at the same time.

"Thou wouldst better sit down, both of thou. The story that I am about to tell thou is quite long and complicated. Perhaps, Harry, thou wilt allow me to decelerate the time here so that thou wouldst not be stranded too long. I know thou hast one more target today."

"Well..." started Harry, not sure about what he should answer to.

"I thank thee." the man said, blinking once, and the trapdoor slammed shut, the ladder disappeared, and the rooms began their discreet humming again.

“Ere it is. By thine terms, it is set on a factor ten. Alright?”

They both nodded, and the man continued his speech.

“Thou see, the man thou callest Sly made an interesting deal with me and my colleague, separately, and ended up practically immortal. Yes, Harry, I know. The souls. He fed on souls. And he invented two tools in that regard. The Dementors, and the Avada Kedavra spell.” He ignored the gasps and continued. “Both transferred the souls into that container ere.” he pointed to the barrel on the desk. “It actually is quite large, is it not? We both checked, my colleague and me, and came with the grand total of 25319 missing souls. Souls which were reportedly missing from our realms.”

“You are... you are...” started Ginny.

“I am not the all-powerful god, if that is what thou thinkest, and I know it is. However, on this earth, I have been given the task to create and my colleague hath the task to destroy. In the initial setting, the deceased souls could go to his realm to either spend all eternity in heavenly gardens if they were deemed good, or spend the same time in burning pits if not. Me, on the other side, I only keep the best creators, inventors, artists, composers, writers... I give them the best conditions to produce, and we enjoy the work of each other.”

“Why do you tell us all this?” asked Harry.

“Because...” the man stopped, and looked at the pensieve. “Because I made a mistake. In the idea of creation, I gave some people magic, and it started with discoveries leading to interesting creations. However, some people started to use magic to destroy, and I do not like that. My colleague likes it, but he knows that, like the weapons invented by the people thou dost call muggles, too much magic could destroy the world. And we both do not want that.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Ginny.

“My colleague wanted to strip all humans from magic, and we disagreed for a long time. We also established chess-like games

where humans would be the pieces, but the last game was... is... quite unusual.”

Harry gasped. “Is? It’s not finished?”

“No it is not. But we will come to that later. Because of the strangeness we noticed, we had to intervene. Each of us pushed in a way or another. For instance, I allowed thee, Harry, to gain strength each time thou avoided death.”

Harry looked at the man in wonder, finally understanding several things about himself. The Creator wasn’t finished, though, and he looked at Ginny.

“Unto thou, Ginevra, I did that just now, because I could not do it before thine soul returned to thine body. Had I not done it, thou wouldst not have survived the shock, despite all Harry could have done. Thou seest, it’s not the first time that somebody retrieved a dead soul and brought it back into a human body, but doing it after a certain delay is very dangerous. Necromancers sacrifice their very life to know and experiment about things like this. Moreover, even if thou hast survived, thou wouldst not be strong enough to follow Harry into the final battle, and he will need thou there.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you for Ginny, and for everything!” said Harry, on the verge of tears.

“I am not finished.”

“Oh. Sorry, sir. Go ahead, then.”

“My colleague allowed the man thou called Sly to escape, several months ago, but without the souls container. Thou brought it back to him just as he disengaged himself from our chess game, and we could finally take him back to our place. He just finished judging the souls from the container, as promised to thee, Harry, and he is now judging the arriving ones. Let me tell thee, Harry, that that one thou sent us was thrown in the deepest pits.”

“Which one, sir?” asked Harry.

“Well, that Adolf thou ‘liberated’ a short time ago.”

“Oh. Oh! Okay... I mean, it’s alright... sir.” Harry stuttered, before remembering something the man had said just before. “If I may, sir, why did you bring the soul container here? Isn’t it empty?” asked Harry.

“I asked Mr Sly... to judge but only remove the ‘good’ souls. Here are the evillest ones. And some of them had been waiting in it for a thousand years. I guess that they are quite angry.” the man opened the desk’s bottom drawer and took Harry grandmother’s pistols from there.

“What are these?” asked Ginny.

“Harry will tell thee later. Thine grandmother is someone full of surprises, Harry. I welcomed her in my realm, and she continually invents new things. Now, hold these firmly.”

He gave both guns to Harry, who held them in the proffered position, canon down and gem up. The man then grasped the barrel of evil souls and, ever so slowly, upended it so that the souls glided into the ruby, which absorbed them. When it was halfway done, he switched to the other gun and finished emptying the souls. Harry was sweating, and Ginny was quite pale. The man put the now empty soul vessel down and concentrated. A second later, it had disappeared. He then pried the guns from Harry’s clenched hands and put them on the table. The gems, initially dull red and blue, were now pitch black, both pulsating with an evil power Harry had rarely felt.

“These are to be used against Voldemort, and only him. The other can be emptied into the sky if thou dost not use it.” the Creator said.

Both teens nodded.

“Now that the soul container is destroyed, the Dementor Kiss and the Death Spell will not work anymore. That hath been one of Mr

Sly's piece of work and he had designed it that way. Use this information to thine advantage when facing the other death cheater. And you would rather do it swiftly, before he comes across another way to kill."

"Death cheater, sir?" asked Ginny.

"Voldemort. He died thirteen years ago. He should not be alive now."

"What about us, sir?" she asked again. "We sure did escape death a few times."

"That is my next point. The two of thou are going to obliterate the current dark lord and look after any other mass murderer after him. Since thou werst made stronger, thou wilt also live longer. In time, thou wilt attain the political level of Mr Dumbledore."

"What about his power level, sir?" asked Ginny.

"This, I think Harry can answer." said the man.

Harry reflected for a second, and nodded. "I've outgrown him already, Gin. And I'm sure you will, too."

"Thine assessment is correct. Not for a couple of years, though. And thou wilt never reach Harry's global power level, Ginny, because he hath something that thou do not."

"His lightning thingamajig?" blurted Ginny, before remembering the man's identity and blushing. In a little voice, she added "I don't care, really."

"Well, if everything is taken care of here," said the man, noticing that Harry had shifted nearer to his girlfriend, "I will be leaving. Take care of yourself, and take care of the world."

They both nodded respectfully, and the man disappeared. A short time later...

Harry had had the presence of mind to ask Hermione about Voldemort's location, and he and Ginny looked up an atlas of England in a public library, before heading there. Because they didn't know how to move faster, they used the train and arrived there for lunch. None of them was hungry, but they couldn't fall because of hypoglycaemia in the middle of a fight, could they? They grabbed a bite at the local fast food line, before searching for the place. Harry made good use of his sparrow form to look at the town from the sky, quickly determining the place. It took them a while, though, and only as the local church was chiming 3pm did they find the exact location.

"Are you alright?" asked Harry, looking at the ominous door.

"As ready as I can." she answered, although the small tremor in her voice told him she wasn't really. Both of them had their wand out and the gun ready.

"Remember," he said. "whatever happens inside, I'll love you. Always."

"Thank you, Harry." she answered, before stepping closer. She looked up at his eyes and murmured "Me too."

They hugged, and their mouths found each other quickly. The kiss was soft and heartfelt, as well as inspiring. Harry felt his emotions swell, and his lightning power up. Now, he was able to quench this, but he had a better use for residual energies. He broke the kiss tenderly, and looked at her. She looked back at him, and saw his determination, as well as the energy around them. Thankfully, nobody was in the secluded street. Harry concentrated, and sent all the gathered power toward the doors, which exploded inwards, blasting half of the six guards there. The other three switched to battle mode, but a wide-area Stunner from Harry got the two guards on the right, and Ginny used the other one's surprised state to aim her own Stunner carefully. The man dropped, unconscious.

Harry didn't have a way to safely send the men to prison. However, he could do something with their wands, knowing that Ollivander would then see them soon. While picking the Death Eaters wands and masks, to check if he recognized anyone, he thought about asking the Minister about posting an Auror on guard duty at Ollivander's.

They left the unconscious guards and headed inside the cottage proper.

After an hour of dwelling in the maze of corridors, encountering very few Death Eaters, but always making short work of them, they arrived to an intersection with several dark wizards. Repeating the earlier actions from the front gate, they succeeded in making all of them fall. In the flurry of spells, though, they didn't notice that one of the wizards stepped back from the fight and flew in a side corridor.

Harry repeated the action of removing the Death Eaters wands and mask, but froze at the third one.

"What is it?" asked Ginny, who had finished her share.

"It's Mr Bode." answered Harry. "He's possessed."

He took his portable pensieve out and extracted the man's rightful soul, before putting it to the unconscious man's temple. After recuperating the other one, he noticed its blackness, and released it at once. He didn't know about its identity, nor did he care about it. What he didn't know, though, is that a place had already been reserved for that man in the burning pits, right next to Hitler. After all, the two men had done horrendous things together, it was only justice that they'd suffer side by side.

After waking the disoriented man, they told him to Apparate outside, and, after he did, they headed deeper inside. Mere minutes afterwards, they came upon a large door behind which they heard voices. They started to walk a few steps back to establish a plan, when a shrill voice yelled behind them.

“Intruders! Intru-”

Harry had whipped his wand out and stunned the yelling man, but the warning had been heard, and several doors closed magically, while the teenagers heard heavy and numerous footsteps approaching, as well as a high-pitched laugh. In the battle that ensued, they were quickly separated and outnumbered, before being hit with several spells at the same time. Wanting to revel in his enemy's defeat, Voldemort undid almost all the spells except the full body bind, and watched as the two teenagers looked fearfully at him, unsuccessfully trying to escape the bind.

“Well well well... what do we do have here?” he asked. “Harry Potter, and... little Ginny?” He frowned, not the most beautiful sight on his already ravaged face. “How is that possible? I'm sure that...” he muttered, before his eyes lit with an evil glint and he fetched his wand. “As someone said, ‘when it doesn't seem to work, that's because you didn't try enough times.’ Avada Kedavra!”

The usual green beam soared toward the young girl, who almost shrieked, her fear not quite enough to break the body bind, though. However, nothing else happened. Harry could have laughed too, if he wasn't magically held, because of Voldemort's surprised face. The Dark Lord tried the spell again, then on Harry, then on one of his follower, who fainted because of the approaching green light. But nobody died.

“My Lord.” said a Death Eater near Ginny. “She has something in her pocket, my Lord.”

“Bring it to me!”

The Death Eater took hold of the silvery-looking item and extracted the sleek gun. None of the Death Eaters there knew muggle weaponry, but Voldemort did, and he gasped, as the Death Eater brought him the gun.

“Soooo...” he drawled, “you want to attack the Lord Voldemort with mere muggle toys? Tsk, tsk, tsk... it seems that you brought your own demise instead.”

He aimed the gun at Ginny, and fired.

The noise made by one angry man can be bothersome. The noise made by thousands of them was deafening. A dark bolt shot from the gun toward Ginny as the six thousand evillest souls to have been killed in the last millennium rushed toward her. Harry desperately wanted to jump in front of her and fought the body find with all his being. It didn't yield before she was almost hit, though.

However, inches before touching her, the pitch black beam separated in a large number of distinct shapes, which swirled around her, trying to touch her, but withdrawing them arm-like appendages in shrieks which sounded like pain. Everybody was astounded at the happenstance, even Harry who had forgotten that he wasn't held anymore.

Not able to touch her, the souls turned around and sought other targets nearby. And they found the Death Eaters. Twenty-four wizards suddenly felt the anger, despair, and longing of thousands of damned souls. This time, the angry souls succeeded in taking a hold at the wizards, and they pulled. Hard. Until something came out while the victim's body fell. Each targeted Death Eater, all of whom guilty of at least one murder because of their initiation ceremony, found his or her soul ripped from his or her body, before the soul was feasted upon by the angry ones. After their feasting, they all disappeared in a cloud, and Harry heard a sound.

A yelp of pain, which reminded him that they weren't alone. He and Ginny were still with Voldemort. Remembering the Chamber of Secrets, it gave him an eerie feeling of déjà vu, even if the being in front of them didn't look like a human anymore. The yelp was quite human, though.

Voldemort was holding his right hand – the wand hand he had had so much problems re-growing – in pain, and a puddle of metal was all that remained from the gun which had been just used. Harry

suspected that the charge of the angry souls was enough to make the gun melt, and that the Creator wasn't disturbed that these weapons of destruction be destroyed.

Profiting from the situation, Harry quickly drew his own gun and, aiming the gun at Voldemort's surprised face, pulled the trigger. In the same way, several thousand souls came out and engulfed the Dark Lord in several layers of evilness.

While the dark souls were pulling Voldemort's soul from his body, Harry dropped the gun on the floor and fetched his wands back, before using his regular one to end Ginny's paralysis.

"Do you think the Creator knew about the outcome?" she asked.

"I don't know." he answered, looking at Voldemort's predicament. The Dark Lord's body was slumped on the ground, and the large dark cloud he witnessed behind the numerous and smaller souls reminded him of his first year. After Ginny got her wand back, he took her hand in his. They didn't leave yet, though. He wouldn't until he was sure that Voldemort was away and done with. He continued to watch as the angry souls picked at the dark lord's soul, bringing its defences down one after the other. There was a moment of relative pause when the last barrier crumbled, as if the dark souls were readying themselves for the final assault. Understanding that, Voldemort's soul began to scream desperately.

The last thing that happened was the rush of six thousand hungry souls on a defenceless Dark Lord's. And, like the matter problem with a singularity, the combined rush of all the dark feelings, memories, and abilities brought upon the largest magical explosion known to man.

It was felt by wizards and witches all over Europe, and they anxiously began sending owls to each other. Owls which finally arrived to the British Ministry of Magic, which didn't have the answer either. Albus had immediately investigated, helped by Minerva, but the old wizard didn't find anything. Besides, he had other questions to ask to the crying Minister he had left with his family at Hogwarts, where

Hermione had just been resurrected. He had tried to send owls to Harry, asking for explanation about the Minister, Hermione, the magical surge, everything. All the owls came back, looking bewildered, with the unopened letter.

The explosion had been purely magical, though, and there was only one physical proof of its happening: the Dark Lord's house location, confirmed by Hermione. There wasn't anything there anymore.

And no dark activity afterwards either.

To be finished in the next chapter: A Reversal of Roles...

Aye aye! I'm done! Well... not quite.  
Seems I have one more to write  
To bring a closure in here,  
' Cause I know the end is near.

## Chapter 38 – A Reversal of Roles (Epilogue)

“Promise me you’ll never do something like that again.” she said softly.

He looked at her eyes, and saw the uncertainty there. “I promise.” he said, and they held each other silently for several minutes.

“You could have fled with it.”

“I know. But I couldn’t. Not without you.”

“I love you.” she said, closing in.

Whatever he wanted to say was drowned in a deep kiss.

A squeal.

“Hey! Stop stealing my towel when I shower!” he indignantly exclaimed. “It’s immature!”

“Immature? What about your pitiful attempts in transfiguring my nightgown?”

“Tell me about them, again.” she said during one of their cuddling sessions.

He stood and extended his hand to her. “Why don’t you join me? After all, I should present you to them one day or another.”

They went to a pensieve that held something so important that it was surrounded by numerous charms.

“It’s a good thing the ring was functioning. You got us out just in time.” she reminisced.

“Yes. When I saw them pausing and heard him scream, I knew it was finished.”

“Happy accelerated birthday!”

“Oh thank you! My favourite cake.”

BANG!

Silence.

“You got me an exploding cake? I’ll get you! Come here!”

As both of them were ticklish, no one won over the other, and the remains of the cake stayed like that for a long time. Except those on themselves. Those got licked away real quick. Or slow.

“The core is inserted in the hollowed part, like... like...” he stuttered, stumbling on his explanation of wand making.

“You are pretty when you blush like that, love.” she said, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Have you sent the story to the Prophet yet?” she demanded, fists on her hips. She knew she resembled her mother, that way, and it often amused her to get specific reactions from him.

Hearing the question, Harry suddenly remembered what he had forgotten earlier. “Err... Oops?”

“And the letter to mum?”

“Double oops?”

“Do it. Now.”

“So, if everything is correct, it should be blue.” he said, pouring a vial of asphodel in the cauldron.

“Bummer. Green again. Try again.”

“She didn’t seem concerned with practicality.”

“ I don’t care, it worked, and I’m sure I can reproduce the experiment.”

“You can reproduce? I hope so.”

“You witch you!”

“Hey, have you changed yourself recently?” she asked, looking up and down at his frame.

“No.”

She pointed to his forehead. “You checked that spot recently?”

“No.”

“You should. It’s disappearing.”

“-and you mix it with mine, and you get-” BANG! “-exactly that.”

“Why did you repeat a failed experiment?” she demanded.

He looked sheepish, all of a sudden. “For experience?”

“ Right! As if failing repeatedly could improve your chances of brewing things right. Look at Neville...”

“Muggles say that, if there’s a one-in-ten chance to succeed, you ought to do it ten times and collect the good one.”

“As you told me, muggles also have laws saying that manipulating those laws don’t work. It’s not because it rains when you wash your car that you’ll succeed in making the rain fall by washing your car.”

He looked at her appraisingly, but his eyes belied his serious face. “I’m impressed you understood that part.”

“Prat!”

“Do you think they would leave us the hell alone and forget about us?” he asked.

“Not bloody likely.” she replied from her desk, where she was pouring over three tomes and taking notes at the same time.

“I love you, but you swear too much.”

“Yes, me too.” she said absently, before adding “And you too.”

He came out of the Potion lab with his apron covered in soot. “Is there any asphodel left, dear? I need some...”

“No. You used the last parts yesterday.” she said, and noticed him taking the apron off. “What are you doing?”

“I have to go buy some.”

“It’s night time outside, and it will be for the next week.”

He stopped and looked at her. “Bummer.”

“You said it.”

“Have you seen my 142nd notebook?” he exclaimed from under his desk, searching through crates of papers.

“Isn’t it between the 141st and the 143rd?”

“No!” he answered, as if it was unnatural for that to occur.

She shrugged. “Don’t know, then. You should have another way of recognizing them, really!”

“How much time do you think we have?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Besides, we count in days while they count in hours. Come here.” he finished huskily, patting the bed.

“They will have a surprise.” he said, helping her packing her last belongings.

“I guess. How much time already? After your explosion on our first time?”

“I think it was three months in... that makes... two years. Do you regret it?”

“Not a bit. But I’m not sure about my family...” she trailed off, biting her lower lip.

He found her adorable, and told her so. And things led to other things...

“Damn! Look at the outside clock!” he exclaimed.

“What about it?”

“It’s time already! They must be eating now.”

She summed the situation quite articulately. “Shit.”

“And you kiss me with this mouth?” he asked, his eyebrows raised.

“I’ll stop doing things with it if you don’t get yourself prepared.”

“What, the hickeys?”

“You prat!”

“Ready?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“No! But let’s face the music.”

“I love you when you are responsible.”

“I’m not. I just sound like it.”

“I don’t like this smile... where is our target?”

“You wouldn’t believe it if I told you. I explored the empty castle a bit while you slept. The activation word is... Schoolprise!”

Hogwarts, the Great Hall, September 1st...

“...and it’s my pleasure to welcome you for another... school... year.” Minerva was saying, but her last words came slowly, for the sight that graced her eyes wasn’t something she was used to. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, had appeared from thin air, right in the middle of the room.

“Thank you very much.” said the boy. “Sorry for being late, Headmistress. We sorta...”

“...slept late? ...did things? ...were taken in our studies?” answered the girl, facing him with her fist to her sides. “What sort of excuse are you going to find this time, Harry?”

“Come on, Gin, don’t yell like that. I already told you it was unladylike, and your bro-”

“Harry?” “Ginny?”

The shocked questions came from their table. They both turned and watched as Hermione, Fred, and George stood up, before walking between the tables toward them. Once they were in direct sight, Hermione took a run and launched into Harry’s arms, crying, and making him stumble on the sorting stool, before falling backwards on the floor. Not even concerned with proper appearance or their current position, the girl was continuously mumbling “Thank you, thank you.”

“You know, Harry, if I didn’t know you as I do, I’d think you are cheating on me.” said Ginny, who was being bear-hugged by her brothers.

“Hey, help me up, instead of joking.” he answered. “I don’t know who put that stool there, but-”

“I did.” she smugly answered.

His eyes got wide, then narrowed, and he struggled to get up. “I’ll get you for that.”

Everybody who hadn’t read the Prophet that summer, as well as those who read it but didn’t believe it, understood that Harry Potter was finally back in the world of the living, and ready for another year at Hogwarts. The five teenagers returned to the Gryffindor table, Harry and Ginny noticing several new heads who were wondering what the commotion was about.

“As I was saying until I was so aptly interrupted...” started the Headmistress again, with a pointed look at the group of redheads and one raven-haired boy. “...welcome to another year in Hogwarts. Today is Friday, so it gives you two days without class. There will be a Prefect reunion in my office at nine, during which we’ll decide on the activities. I expect everyone else to stay in your House quarters until-”

Harry tuned the woman's speech out, and looked around, noticing that many of the students who knew him from two years ago smiled or nodded at him. The others looked at him in wonder, or, in the case of most girls, with a strange smile, either dreamy or hungry. He was jerked from his thoughts by a particular sentence in the Headmistress' speech. Everyone else seemed to follow the same lead, as the Hall grew completely silent.

"...and, this year, after more than a century in service of the school, Professor Dumbledore decided to retire."

In the shocked silence, she stepped back a bit so that the aged Professor could stand, helped with a cane. Albus opened his mouth to speak, when a sound prevented him to.

A clapping.

Harry Potter, the boy he had wanted to talk to for months, the boy he wanted to apologize to, was sending his greetings in a touching way. Everybody soon followed, and the hall soon resounded under the applause of the hundreds of standing students. After five minute, during which the clapping seemed to intensify each time the old man opened his mouth to talk, the room finally quieted and everybody sat down.

"Thank you." he said in a strained voice, before sitting down.

"Thank you, Headmaster." answered Minerva, still standing.

At Dumbledore's sharp look, she smiled. "For most of the people who passed in these walls, you are Hogwarts Headmaster." Turning back to the students, she smiled. "I know I have several other things to say, but your young stomachs won't listen properly until filled. I just have some words to say beforehand..." she stopped for effect, and threw a smug look at Albus, who looked back questioningly. What was she doing? She turned back to the room and spoke loudly. "Oddment! Nitpick! Fluripar! Bionic!" And she sat down in the resulting shocked silence.

Even when the food appeared, nobody moved for a second, until several persons started clapping again. The room once again rolled in the applause, although it was shorter than Dumbledore's. Soon, everybody was eating joyfully.

During the meal, an owl deposited a message at Harry's place, and he quickly read it, before nodding to the Headmistress.

Harry and Ginny, the message said.

Please meet the Heads of House after dinner in my office.

Minerva McGonagall.

A bit later...

"...and that's how we ended up ready for the same year." he finished.

Harry had just told Albus and Minerva about his summer with Ginny. Not that they didn't know. Despite the professors' inability to reach them, the teenagers had found ways to send messages from wherever they hid. And studied. And worked out. At an accelerated time. Harry had nicely filled his 16-year frame, and Ginny had developed into a beautiful 15-year old girl. Due to the teens' stance, and the fact that they practically lived together unsupervised for two years, there was no doubt about their feelings for each other. However, their request was quite unheard of. They didn't want to enter third year, like Minerva had thought. They wanted to jump directly in seventh year. The 4-year gap couldn't be crossed with only two years, even with intensive study.

"You do realize, I hope, that seventh year ends with the NEWTs, and that you can't go to classes where you don't have the required level. You'll have to pass OWLs first, to be allowed to enter these classes." she said.

"Very well." Harry answered.

After a moment of silence, Minerva looked at them, then at Dumbledore, then back at the annoying teens. "What?" she asked.

"Do test us." answered Ginny.

A pause.

"I'll see what I can do." answered a grumpy Headmistress.

"Now that this is out of the way," said Dumbledore, "can you tell me exactly what happened to Voldemort? And why a 20-mile radius zone centred on Little Hangleton is completely impervious to magic."

"Impervious?" asked Harry. "In what sense?"

"In the sense that no magic functions in that zone."

"That's interesting." Harry mused, tapping his chin thoughtfully.

"You didn't know?" asked the old man in wonder.

"Sorry, no. It must be one of the side effects of the explosion."

"And about Voldemort?"

Harry removed his portable pensieve from his pocket and put it on the desk, opening it. He only warned them about the noise before the two professors jumped in. After a few minutes, they came out, visibly shaken.

"Harry," Dumbledore asked. "What was the spell you put in the weapons?"

"It was no spell, Headmaster. I mean... Professor. It was six thousand evil souls. In each gun."

Both teachers paled and their eyes went wide. "How..." started Minerva, but she couldn't formulate her question.

“How did we come in possession of these?” asked Ginny.

The Headmistress nodded.

“Well... Harry? That’s your story.”

“Thanks, Gin.” he said, before turning to the professors. “You remember when you found us stumbling out of a house in Little Hangleton?”

They nodded.

“We just came out of Voldemort’s lair. He had killed Ginny with an Avada Kedavra, and Hermione died the same way.”

Minerva “Died? But...”

Harry continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “The man who helped us escape has inv-”

“Speaking about him, Harry,” Dumbledore interjected, “where is he? He’s a dangerous man.”

A smile. “I know, Professor. I had two years to think about him, and I reached the appropriate conclusion. I know who he was. I also happen to know it was him who invented the Avada Kedavra and the Dementors, both in the same intent: to give him souls to feed on. That’s how he managed to stay alive for so long. But he was stopped.”

Despite his old age, the man knew his way around sentences and key words. “Was?” he asked. “Stopped?”

“Yes. He’s not on this world anymore. We encountered one of the... Powers... he had cheated to accomplish that feat, and He told us about his state. Before filling our guns with dark souls.”

“What are you saying, Harry?” asked Albus. “Is he still alive or not?”

Harry sighed. "The man you are talking about has been belittled and defamed by my own ancestor for his beliefs. Even if those weren't gentle, the man was honourable and wasn't the dark wizard everybody wants him to be."

A pause.

"But don't worry." he continued. "He's gone now."

"And what about the weapons?" asked Minerva. "The... guns?"

"The device used to collect the souls taken out with the spell and the Dementors looked like a pensieve, and several people got fooled by it. The Minister, as well as one of the Unspeakables, brought a soul to their temple, and ended up possessed by it."

"Do you know whose soul possessed them, Harry?"

A pause.

"I know about the Minister." he answered, looking at his feet. Ginny, knowing about it because of their long talks about it in the Hideaway, took his hand encouragingly.

Just as Dumbledore's mouth was opening to ask about the name again, Harry told them. And the professor's mouth stayed open in shock, quickly imitated by Minerva's. Both teachers knew a bit of Muggle history, especially as that particular bit was closely linked with Grindewald's raise in power and subsequent demise. After a long pause, Minerva recovered enough to speak again.

"Well... that explains several of the laws he passed."

"To return to the pensieve of souls, the... entity who we talked with had separated the souls in it, keeping only the most evil ones, and it was he who filled our guns with them. After discussing with Ginny, we also came to the conclusion that, since they were inherently evil, they

weren't able to reach her because she's inherently good. The Death Eaters, on the other hand..."

Everyone nodded.

After a pause, during which the adults digested the information and the teenagers were thoughtful about it, Harry spoke again. "Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You are really retiring?"

The old man sighed. "Yes. The elapsed year has taken a hard toll on my old body, and I'm not sure I'll be able to spend the whole year teaching again. As Minerva... I mean, the Headmistress... told you all earlier, we found a suitable replacement in the person of Ludmila Rogdanova. She was already teaching the subject in the Durmstrang academy, but got ill and needed a change in climate."

Seeing the disgruntled faces, he smiled. "But I'll still spend time around here. After all, it's almost as if I was a piece of furniture in that castle, now. I'm sure that, even after I die, I'll return to haunt it, like professor Binns did."

"Did, sir?"

"Yes. You obviously didn't catch everything I said, young man." said Minerva in mock indignation. "Professor Binns has slowly lost his grasp on reality, and completely disappeared over July. We found a proper replacement in the form of Samuel Rodenbach, who comes from America."

"Minerva and I also discussed about a couple of other subjects that I wanted to include in the curriculum, but couldn't find proper teachers in." said Albus, before looking at Harry intently.

"What?" answered the teenager anxiously, having a faint idea about what it was.

“What do you want to do after graduating, Harry?” asked Minerva.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, before the boy answered. “For a long time, I wanted to be an Auror. After seeing what I saw and doing what I did, I’m not sure about it anymore. I mean, Voldemort is dead, now, and most of his Death Eaters too. I don’t know, in fact.”

“You should have thought about it before thinking about joining seventh year, Harry. And you, Ginny?”

“Well, there are several things I want to try, but I want to understand the wizarding society first. I think I’ll be working with dad for a time.”

“Have you ever thought about teaching, Harry?” asked Dumbledore to a surprised teenager.

It took a moment for Harry to ponder it, before he was able to answer. “No... I’m not good enough in any course except Defence and it’s not a topic I particularly like anymore.”

“I didn’t mention the course, Harry.” he answered. “Let me tell you a story. Several years ago, there was a teacher here. Passionate about her course, and the students loved her. Unfortunately, she was killed and nobody had ever been able to teach the course ever since. You know the story, Harry. It was your grandmother. Would you agree to teach Technomancy, after you graduate?”

Harry was stunned. Him, a teacher? After all the rules he had broken? He thought about it for a long time, before smiling at the old man. “I’d like that, sir. In fact, I have another idea of a course which could be interesting.”

“What is it?” asked Minerva.

Harry drew his platinum-coated wand and showed it to them. To their surprised faces, he said “Wand making.”

After a long pause after which they demanded to know what it was made of, thus eliciting another silent pause, they heard a knock at the door. It was the Prefects, right on time for the meeting. Harry and Ginny weren't Prefects this year, because they hadn't been reachable, and they proceeded to leave the office, when Dumbledore stopped them.

"I happen to know, since I participated in their making, how the Prefect status works," he whispered while the other students sat noisily in the chairs conjured by Minerva. "It's linked to the badge. I'm sure you will find creative, although responsible, use of a... let's say "borrowed" badge." He winked.

The two teenagers stood still for a second, before breaking into a large grin. That was going to be an interesting year.

One and a half century later...

Through his office window, Harry looked at the pick-up game of Quidditch the students were playing and sighed. He wanted to play with them, but his life had loaded him with responsibilities, and he couldn't escape them like that. He reflected about what had happened in the 150 years since he had told his former Headmaster that he agreed to teach.

Despite the advanced exams, despite the stress of passing the OWLs in Halloween and the NEWTs the same year in June – Hermione had made a sour face which had lasted six months – his last school year had been his last year of real freedom. Afterwards, he had followed the career of Professor in Technomancy and Wand Making. Right after marrying Ginny.

At some time during his last year as a student, he had visited Ollivander and revealed his identity to him. The old man had nodded, as if he had suspected something like that, and had extracted a promise that he would continue to help him after he graduated. Harry had groaned, but he was fond of the old man, and promised to spend

all his summers helping the man until a suitable replacement had graduated from Hogwarts.

It had taken several years to convince him, but Blaise Zabini had finally taken the job, right after marrying Harry's sister. Megan, who had, several years later, written the Equality Act, the base of today's Bill of Equal Right Between Sentient Creatures, applied to everyone: magical creatures, wizards, elementals, muggles alike. Unfortunately, Megan had been killed by a racist fanatic a short time later, and Harry had made sure that Blaise and the kids were settled comfortably before taking on a personal crusade against fanatisms of all kinds.

The Act had helped Remus reintegrate the wizarding society, though, just a year before Hermione and Severus, lawfully married after her Master's thesis in Potions, had invented the vaccine against Lycanthropy. It had involved complicated ceremonies to take place over the time span of a year, but it had been a complete success. Several years after that, the couple, who had only taken time out of their studies to spend a week of honeymoon, had gone into disarray over the education of Enguerran, their adolescent son, and they had separated. Severus had delved into more complicated potions, inventing several of today's healing potions – more powerful and better tasting than the infamous Skele-Gro, for instance. Hermione had gone to Harry to learn Technomancy in detail, and invented a shielding spell against the Unforgivables. The association of pure magic and technomancy allowed her spell to detect an incoming curse by the air moved by the curse beam, and her shield simply let the curse pass through, but moved the caster out of the way. Enguerran had continued his brilliant education in Hogwarts and took the position of Potion professor after his father's retirement.

Harry's mind went back to his sister's wedding. After that event, Harry, who had been so taken by the teaching, had decided to take a sabbatical year and had taken his wife on a trip around the world, visiting his muggle friends in the way. Jason and Joan had been happily nursing their third child, while Tamara and Kevin had been their usual selves, respectively hot-tempered and smug. They were a tad mollified by the years, though, and also by the fact that Tamara was pregnant with twins. In-vitro fertilization, used by muggles when regular reproduction means failed, had often the effect of giving

multiple births. They all enjoyed a week together, reminiscing the good times, before Harry and Ginny left for America, starting their world tour there. When they returned, Ginny was sporting an unnaturally large swollen belly for a 6-month pregnancy, and surprised everybody with triplets, whom they named Molly, Lily, and Albus.

Albus Dumbledore had died a couple of year before, after a satisfying retirement with his brother Aberforth. Harry had visited him several times, repairing their mutual trust, and the old men had taught him everything they knew which wasn't related to teaching. Needless to say, Harry had returned home a few times with a head pounding with useless information. Unless it was plain alcohol.

The great man's funeral had brought about almost every witch and wizard from Great Britain and several countries around the world. Despite his grief and his dislike of public occurrences, Harry had pronounced an inspired funeral oration before returning to his bench besides Ginny.

Ginny. She was still his wife after all that time, and they were both happy with it. After a career in the Ministry, where she ended at the Department of Education, she switched to Hogwarts to help Harry who had just become Headmaster. With her, he had then proceeded in the changes he had wanted for the school. He had already changed the curriculum when he had been a Professor, taking charge of an introductory course to magic for the muggleborns, for instance. Now that he was in charge, and with a wife having so many connections inside the Ministry, he went for deeper changes.

Using his own magic, as well as the one linked to his position, he had changed the castle's structure. Instead of a cold building with dangerous stairs and dank dungeons, it became a campus-like architecture, with several smaller buildings scattered on the grounds. It needed more caretakers, then, and, despite many raised eyebrows, he decided to employ Draco Malfoy. The man had been helpful in the past, and was wilting away in his wing of the ex-Malfoy Manor. Draco had been hesitant, but, after several days of work, he had thanked Harry profusely before thoroughly investing himself in his job.

In Hogwarts campus, Harry used several newly-constructed buildings to create an elementary school for magical children. There, like muggles, they would learn to live in a disparate society, and not like supremacist recluses the pureblood had often been raised to be. After finding Gryffindor's secret rooms and the blood samples in there, he had found a way to detect elemental ability, and several political agreements afterwards, he had also created an Elemental course, and Magiuses and Elementals alike were quite happy to drop pretenses.

As the Houses system had always been the source of disagreement between the student, as well as the teachers, he had also removed it. Now, students were lodged by year, and there was only one Quidditch team for the school. The difference resided in that it played against teams from the other magical schools over Great Britain, and the team winning had a shot at student teams from other countries. It opened the student to the fact that schools existed outside Hogwarts, and in other countries as well.

The Technomancy professorship had been the hardest, but also the most interesting, because he had had to spend a long time documenting himself on what muggles did in almost every sciences. His long life allowed him to, though, and he had often associated his name with Hermione for publications, either in the magical world or in the muggle. His name had also become famous because he introduced the shape-shifting theory to the magical world, and his chocolate frog card was the one where the text was written in the smallest font – just to be able to hold everything.

Harry opened the eyes he hadn't been aware of closing. All his memories were wearing on him, even if he was happy, like Dumbledore before him, to use several pensieves to store the direst away. Upon opening his eyes, he smiled at the portrait right in front of him, and the two people on the portrait smiled back. Right after graduating, he had remembered about his parents' portrait from his vault and, after asking them, had deposited their souls into it, giving it life. It was even more life-like than the other magical portraits, as his parents were sometimes able to take a ghost form to escape the painting. And it was more resistant, too. The other magical portraits constantly had to be recharged magically. In Hogwarts, the castle's

magic was taking care of it, but it still appeased him that his parents were able to see and comment on his accomplishments. And pranks.

Harry smiled. Several times over his professorship, he had driven the whole school mad with practical jokes. It was always good-natured and done at times where it was safe – which meant no exam or other unpleasant happenstance. He had never been found out, and people had started to whisper that the Marauders' ghosts had infested the castle. People at large still didn't know the identity of the infamous pranksters, and Harry had planned his pranks to confuse the audience even more.

The Marauders themselves had rallied the Weasley twins' ideas and had been producing joke items for most of their life, staying young in spirit – something their spouses and even their progeny hadn't accepted all the time. Remus had been the first to depart: despite having been cured, his body had already suffered greatly from years of lycanthropy. Sirius had got his first white hair only then, but continued to play pranks till the end: people coming to his funeral had been shocked to see his body sit suddenly on his bier and start singing a tavern song in a cavernous voice.

When Harry had become Headmaster, he hadn't had anymore time to amuse himself with pranks, but he was still enjoying when others did, especially the numerous descendants of Fred and George. Bill, too, liked the pranks, even if he didn't have much time to witness them. The man had asked to be transformed into a ghost to check on his family, something that he had done with a religious-like zeal for almost a century, before asking to be relieved from his state. He couldn't watch the numerous houses populated with redheads anymore. He had discussed with Ginny for a long time, both of them crying, before being sent to the Heaven's judge.

Thinking of Bill brought about an older thought, about Fred and George. After digging in the twin's life, Dumbledore had finally found the reason why George was able to pass through walls when kicking on them. It was due to the strange substance from Slytherin's office in Azkaban, which container had crashed on the floor and splashed George's feet. That had brought several rounds of laughter and several years of pranks from the twins. However, try as they might,

the twins, and their pranking descendants, had never been able to catch Harry and didn't dare prank Ginny at all. Harry was very powerful but calm and collected – most of the time, which meant, when he wasn't angry. His wife was powerful in her own right, and hot-tempered as well. Fred and George had also been unable to do anything against Ron and his wife Luna. The two of them had been, despite their aloofness, two of the most insightful Seers of their time.

Harry sat down in front of the mound of paper which continually appeared on his desk. He had charmed his desk to check the arriving paper so that most of the paperwork was treated automatically, but it seemed that he still had to sift through most of it manually. He sighed, and closed his eyes again. He had started one of his reminiscing mental trips, and wasn't done with it. The last thing of importance he had done, as the 'most powerful wizard' and ambassador of the magical world, was to put an end to the Secrecy Act. It was just in time, because muggles had already been studying applied genetics, and several squibs and wizards living in the muggle world had had their blood checked by muggle hospitals. On top of that, the wizards could help in the newly-formed international project of space exploration. The muggles had finally understood that a project of planet terraformation, despite the time needed, would yield much more than the initial cost. They had estimated that Mars wouldn't be ready before centuries, but Harry knew that with a bit of magic, things could go faster.

The disclosure of the magical world brought a shock on the population but, at least, they didn't go after them with pitchforks demanding that they burn on the stake. Some did, but the targeted wizards had been able to defend properly and legally: the wand was considered like a gun and that was all. After a few tentative years, everyone had settled down. Helped with Ginny, Harry had used a large part of his immense and ever-increasing fortune, as well as his political weight, to ease the wizard-muggle relationships.

After this, several years had gone by calmly and routine had settled. Harry and Ginny always kept an eye on their descendants, and were looked upon as models by most wizards and witches, as well as numerous elementals and muggles.

His mind bringing in more recent topics of reflection, he remembered what had happened the week before. During an interview for a professorship in Divination, one of the applicants had suddenly stood up and spoken with a cavernous voice. Browsing through her mind afterwards, Harry had determined that it was a true Prophecy, and had hired her. The Prophecy had involved an orphaned boy destined to defeat the next Dark Lord. Despite Harry's continuous efforts, not all orphanages were filled with happy youngsters, and he had launched the member of the still-active Order of the Phoenix in search of the boy.

The roles were reversed, but he wouldn't do like Dumbledore. He would protect the boy, and he would check on him. Even at night, if there wasn't any other alternative. After all, it was a well-known fact that Harry Potter didn't need sleep anymore. What very few people knew is that Harry had charmed the Headmaster's office and quarters in the same way his grandmother's Hideaway had been. That could have posed a problem with his aging, but his real age wasn't even showing. People thought he was 164 years old, but with all the accelerated time spent in his office, he knew, inside, that he topped the 200-year barrier. It was the only way, anyway, to allow him to write his Memoirs, like Dumbledore had done before him. That particular read had been interesting, and he learned about the old man's faults, hoping he wouldn't repeat them. Thinking of books, he also remembered when he had returned to the old bookstore near the funfair, surprising the owner. He had paid a hefty sum and asked the man to leave him alone for an hour. When the man returned, the only thing that had changed in the bookstore was an additional bookcase in the corner. The man had blinked, but Harry had cryptically said that he had owned the building of the bookcase to an old man, and left. Unbeknownst to the muggle owner, Harry had merely dispelled the hiding charm before removing the books from it. Mostly dark arts books which didn't have their place in a now-muggle bookstore for kids.

He stood up, stretching, and looked at his black mane in the mirror. It had returned to its initial colour a few years after Voldemort's demise. Several people asked him if he used hair dye, before remembering that he was the first shape-shifter in recorded history (his ancestor hadn't been recorded as such) and didn't need dye to change his hair

colour. The truth was that he didn't even need it. Not yet, anyway. Ginny had started morphing her hair back into its initial colour a few years back, when she had spotted her first white hairs. And she wasn't living in a constantly accelerated time frame like him. The Creator had been true. He would live a very long life. Harry had known for a long time the disadvantages of living longer than others. Outliving one's own children is one of the most painful experiences. He wasn't sure he could survive outliving his wife.

He shook his head, and allowed his natural optimism to flow again. They were both alive at the moment, and they had great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren who were enjoying their education. Speaking of whom...

He extended his hand and his faithful Firebolt jumped in his hand. He smirked. What was the interest of living longer than most if you can't learn useful talents in the way? Transfiguring his robes into the Gryffindor's Quidditch uniform he was always wearing when playing Quidditch, he opened the window and jumped in the normal time frame. He saw Andrew and Jenny between the other players and waved to his descendants. He could name each of them, as well as each of the other students as well. He knew them and, looking at their flying, realized that they were happy. Happy to live in a carefree world where the main danger resided in Quidditch accidents. He smiled. Despite the threat outlined in the Prophecy, the world was well, and the next generation was happy.

He joined the fray.

The End

Finally, I wrote 'The End'  
Looking back, I comprehend  
That I liked writing, so much  
That I'll persist. Stay in touch!

Final Author's Notes: Finally. It's done. 277777 words full of entrancing magic, powerful battles, and unconditional love. I thank the many reviewers who took the time to give me a bit of advice or a

pat on the back. Here was the closure on Strengthening Wounds: I don't think there will be a sequel.

Now, take a break, and, if it isn't done yet, read my other stories.  
(grins)